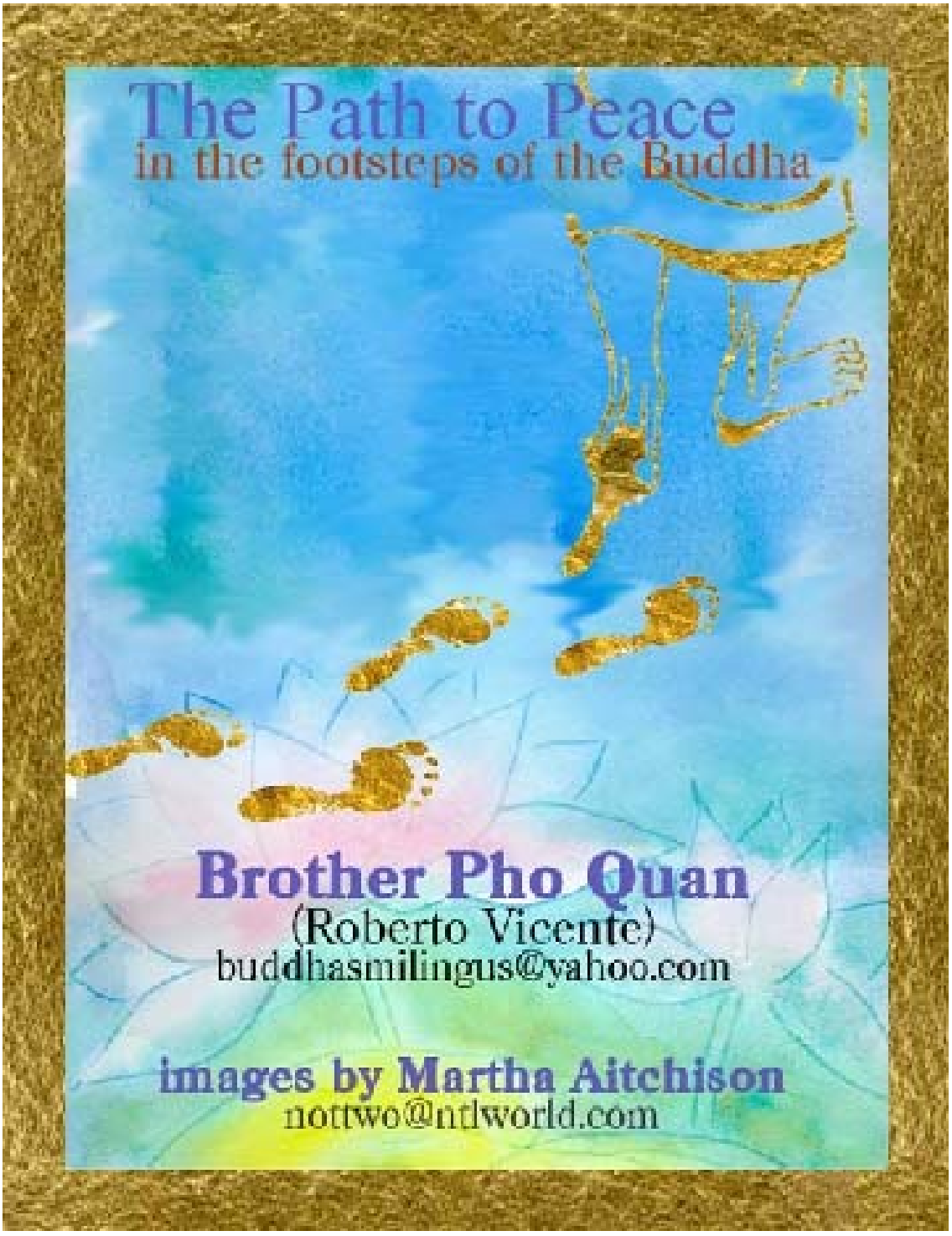


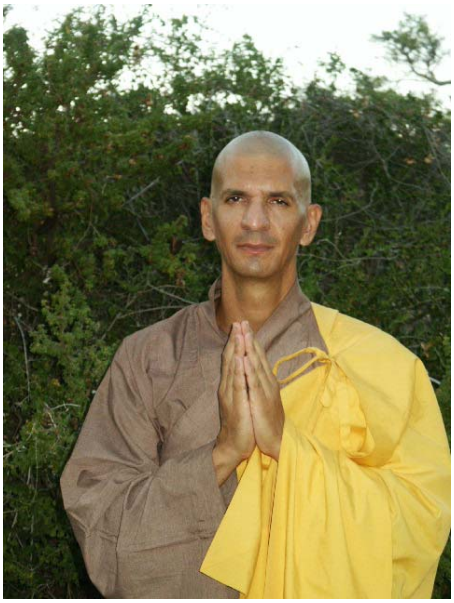
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Synopsis

Directed towards the modern practitioner and expressed in a vivid personal narrative, *The Path to Peace (in the footsteps of the Buddha)* is an accessible journey chronicling Buddhist practice for the newcomer to meditation, and going on to reveal the profound insights of the Dharma to be a part of our everyday lives as well as to simply detailing how to apply advance practice techniques. Yes, peace of mind and fulfillment are possible in our fast-paced, high-tech culture. *The Path to Peace* is an enthusiastic celebration of personal discovery, demonstrating the 'aware and caring' practice of the Buddha to be every bit as relevant and 'enlightening' for today's spiritual traveler as it was 2,500 years ago.

About Us

Br. Pho Quan



After seven years of deepening practice, Brother Pho Quan, 'Universal Contemplation' (Roberto Vicente) happily ordained in 2002. His spiritual experience has been with local temples and retreat centers in the Bay Area of California. He has been influenced by Jack Kornfield, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, Ven. Narada Mahathera, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He has a BA degree in English (CSUS 1979). While a lay person, he wrote a general manual on Buddhism, Buddhasmile (2000) which can be read at www.buddhistinformation.com. His emphasis is the practice and fundamentals as expressed and experienced through the discourses of the Pali Canon (please visit www.accesstoinsight.org).

Martha Aitchison



Martha Aitchison is an artist using traditional media as well as the computer as a painting tool. The illustrations in The Path to Peace are hand drawings further processed electronically. Originally from Argentina, Martha lives in England and is a practicing Buddhist, involved with Theravada groups there. She holds degrees in Architecture (1962), Town Planning (1973) and Art and Design (1990). She is now retired and trying to keep her life simple at her home in a London suburb, dedicated to family and friends, cat, art and a garden, which she manages as a mini wild life reserve. She has also recently become a grandmother for the first time. For more information about her work, visit her website www.nottwo.org.

"It's been Martha's and my goal to bring the Dharma, the Buddha's insights and teachings to our contemporary Western culture. The message of awareness, compassion and wisdom is the same; we've only expressed it for a modern audience. I am very grateful to Martha for her willingness and enthusiasm, generously donating her vision of the Dharma through her artwork. We have spent two years in collaboration to see the Path of Peace to completion. We hope our humble offering will bring the reader to continue to investigate the Dharma. Joy, Wisdom and Peace are to be known in this beautiful practice of awakening and understanding." (Brother Pho Quan).

May you all be happy and may you all be blessed.

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THE PATH TO PEACE
(In the Footsteps of the Buddha)



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AN: Anguttara Nikaya—The Further-Factored Collection of Sutras
DN: Digha Nikaya—The Long Collection of sutras
DH: Dhammapada—The Path of the Dharma
IT: Itivuttaka—'This was said' Collection of sutras
MN: Majjhima Nikaya—The Middle Length Collection of Sutras
SN: Samyutta Nikaya—The Grouped Collection of Sutras
THERG: Theragatha—Verses of the Elder Monks

THERAG: Therigatha --Verses of the Elder Nuns
UD: Udana—Exclamations
VN: Vinaya Pitaka—The Monastic Code Collection

The Sanskrit usage of words and phrases has been adopted since they are readily used and referred to by the modern audience (i.e. sutra, Dharma, karma, Nirvana, etc.).

PART ONE

THE PATH

Chapter One

THE JOURNEY—
Our Spiritual Awakening



"Suppose a man wandering in a forest wilderness found an ancient path, an ancient trail, traveled by men of old, and he followed it up, and by

doing so he discovered an ancient city, an ancient royal capital, where men of old had lived, with parks and groves and lakes, walled round and beautiful to see, so too I found the ancient path, the ancient trail, traveled by the Fully Enlightened Ones of old." SN 12, 65. "One is the path that leads to worldly gain; and the path that leads to deathlessness—Eternal Bliss, is the other." DH 75.

Our Journey



WE ARE ALL ON A JOURNEY. Everyday we set off for somewhere, to see someone, to start one thing or finish something else. We turn the car ignition, the cold engine grinds and we make our way through snarled morning traffic. Some of us are off running errands while other people fly across the country on business trips. We are always on the move.

Georgia O'Keefe journeyed with brilliant colors and a brush over canvas. John Coltrane scored musical journeys. Hugh Hefner of Playboy notoriety has wandered in the bedroom of silk sheets and carnal fantasies. Bill Gates has ventured through high-tech, cyber space. But how many of us lead such exciting, headline grabbing lives? What we see on the evening news or glimpse on the tabloids while waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store is far removed from our humdrum lives. Meals are to be prepared. The trash needs to be taken out. The laundry has piled up. Children are to be picked up from school. We just want to lead a quiet, secure life and to be happy. We sigh as we turn the lights out to sleep.

We pick up the pieces after a divorce or death. There are accidents and illnesses, family conflicts and misunderstandings. Problems and upsets have a way of creeping up on us. Depressed, we pop a valium or prozac in our mouths. Diet pills are a quick fix for the flab around our waste. Liquor dulls the pain of a soured life. We look around to see that we have arrived at

the same old unhappy, dissatisfied ending; different faces, different places, same ending.

I remember as a boy my father crying when he received the wire that his mother had passed away. Here was this big man weeping into his hands. I didn't understand. What was death? Not understanding, we stare at ourselves in the mirror, unable to imagine such an unlikely ending happening to us. "Is this it?" I thought. "Am I missing something here? Is this as good as it gets?" Other than being a 'nice guy,' I wasn't prepared for the hurricane of intimate relationships, work place politics and backstabbing, and life's ups and downs. I often joked how much nicer it would be to return to the womb. My confusion was great, my worries and doubts paralyzing. Coming from immigrant parents who didn't speak the English language or know the American culture didn't help things either.

A voice of unhappiness echoes. What's the right way? Where do we turn? What's next? Now is the time to pause and listen to that urgent voice. Our spiritual awakening, this desire for happiness, fulfillment, and understanding usually comes after repeated let-downs, a lesson hard learned, or a desire for a more meaningful life ("Loss through aging, loss through illness, loss of wealth, and loss of relatives..." MN 82). Our awakening isn't the same as rousing to an alarm clock in the morning, yawning and stretching. That is an awakening of sorts. When we are careless and unaware of ourselves we are impatient, greedy, angry or confused. To be 'awake' then is to try and understand and come to terms with all of the conflicting conditions that have made us the persons we are. To be 'awake' is to ask questions, to wonder why, to look deeply at our motives, desires, and conduct. To be 'awake' is to stir from our automatic tendency to step into situations and relationships and not just wait for a relationship to sour or to be impatient for the thousandth time with a family member. To be 'awake' is take responsibility for our well-being while sharing in the well-being of others.

Here before us is a journey like none other. Are you ready to start? The way will open and brighten as we begin moving ahead. Others have gone before us and have kindly marked the way, struggling with the same questions and difficulties we all have. This is our shared journey of spiritual discovery and awakening. Happiness and understanding aren't far away. We are headed on the Path to Peace.

Aware and Caring



If you are going from Chicago to San Francisco, you could go in any direction you wanted, eventually getting there. You could go east then cross the Atlantic Ocean, travel across Europe and Russia, down through China, take a freighter and finally dock in San Francisco. That is one option. When we are out of touch and disconnected from the present moment the simple things in life become difficult and a struggle. You see, we have been wandering aimlessly. The present moment is our ready compass, always constant, showing the way like magnetic North.

The snag is that we race along the path ignoring the signs along the way, and suddenly find ourselves stumbling and lost. As we will come to know, there is a tug-of-war of forces compelling us to act and react. Everything is in restless motion (see Chapter Seven on impermanence). The restlessness consumes us, our impulsiveness the compelling force leading to all our problems, upsets and suffering. Careless is what we are when we are absent minded, allowing desire, anger and confusion to get the better of us.

But in order to awaken we first have to be aware and caring. Feeling our energy ebb and our stomachs growl is an awareness. Caring is a direct

Our Next Step—Stopping!



There is a joke about the man who goes to the doctor with shoulder pain. "Every time I do this it hurts." The man rolled his shoulder forward with difficulty. The doctor answered, "Well stop doing that!" The simple cure for our problems and aliments is stopping. A student was having problems with his practice and felt as though he had dug himself into a rut. "Stop digging," his teacher retorted.

As boys and girls first learning to cross the street, we were taught to stop, look both ways, and wait until it was safe to cross. Stopping was all important back then and stopping is all important now. As simple as this may seem, stopping is where our understanding and direct life experience begins to connect and develop and our awareness to expand. Learning anew how to look at ourselves, we see the world around us as it is rather than what our desires, hatred and confusion distort our lives to be.

Meditation

"...[The Buddha] seats himself cross-legged, sets his body erect, and establishes awareness in front of him. He does not occupy his mind with self-affliction, or the affliction of others, or the afflictions of both; he sits with his mind set on his own welfare, on the welfare of others, and on the welfare of both, even on the welfare of the whole world." MN 91.



Needing to be busy and occupied, I have friends and know of instances where people couldn't sit to meditate because they felt 'unnatural' or out of sync. It is sad to see how people are consumed and driven by

their habit energies. One woman after her first meditation told how she wanted to scream and jump up and down during the sitting because her restlessness was so strong.

But little do you realize—you have been meditating your whole life. There isn't a day that goes by that you haven't meditated. What, me meditate? Go on! I don't meditate. Where would I get the time?

Sitting, stopped in bumper-to-bumper traffic, you stare off into space. You aren't paying attention to the news report from the radio. You have stopped thinking about the deadline at work, whose birthday is coming up next, or browsing the internet for flight deals. It isn't until the person behind you taps his horn that you are stirred back into the commuter grind. A flood of thinking comes back as you sigh and put the car into gear. Where were you? What happened in those moments when you drifted off? Believe it or not, you were meditating!

And what about those times in the shower with the hot water stinging your back as you stood there unwinding? Or the times you flopped down on the couch spacing out for a moment. Waiting in the doctor's office, you look up surprised when your name is called. Where did the time go? Yes, these are all meditative moments as your self-absorption stopped and nothing demanding happened. It isn't too often in our busy lives where nothing happens.

There is a great misconception about meditation. Thoughts of a long, white-haired guru sitting in a contorted position come to mind. There are fears of cult groups and brain washing. But meditation has nothing to do with any of these things and everything to do with just bringing a moment of quiet and stillness to your life. This is the 'work' of a spiritual practice; to be at ease, to heal and understand. The Buddha was asked what could be gained by meditation. He answered nothing could be gained. The person must have looked confused. The Buddha went on to explain, "Let me tell you what I lost through meditation: sickness, anger, depression, insecurity, the burden of old age, the fear of death. That is the good of meditation, which leads to Nirvana."

The practice of meditation has transformed my own life to one of true joy, tranquility and patience. From ancient times, Bhaddiya also exclaimed his happiness during sitting meditation, "Oh, bliss! Oh, bliss!" The next day he

was called before the Buddha to explain himself. "...[before] I lived fearful, agitated, distrustful, and afraid. But now, revered sir, on going alone into the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty place [to meditate], I am fearless, unagitated, confident, and unafraid. I live unconcerned, unruffled, my needs satisfied…"

The Buddha summed it up, "In who exists no inner stirrings, having passed beyond being this or that, and for whom becoming and non-becoming are overcome, he is one—beyond fear, blissful, without grief..." UD 2, 10.

Sitting and Centering

If you have ever closely watched a hen rest, you will see that it makes a few turns in a small circle to find the 'right spot' to sit. At the beginning of our meditation we, too, should get comfortable and stretch to get out all the kinks, tensions and stiffness of our bodies. Stand and do a few stretches before first sitting down.

There are a number of meditation positions. Find the one that is most comfortable for you—sitting on the floor on a cushion with our legs crossed (the Lotus position of legs wrapped up underneath each other can be too difficult and painful for beginners); sitting Indian style on a cushion with our legs open and crossed over at the ankles; on a small meditation bench; sitting on a chair; or for those people with chronic back problems, they can lay on the floor.

Posture is important. Sitting too erect or rigid only brings added tension to our bodies and thoughts. Meditation should be comfortable. However, we need to notice if we are sitting slouched or leaning off to one side or the other as well as sitting hunched over. Loose-fitting clothing that doesn't pinch is preferable. Feel free to loosen your belt, undo a few buttons on your shirt or blouse and be relaxed.

Now using the technique of centering (access meditation), we ease into meditation. Our daily activities have a way of charging our bodies and thoughts. Begin by sensing your forehead. Is it wrinkled and tense? Are your eyebrows arched with tension, narrowed and meeting at the middle? Relax and release. Are your lips tightly shut? Gently smile. Notice whether you are grinding your teeth. Relax your jaw, allowing it to drop open naturally. Finally, lowering your chin should make you feel more

comfortable. Remember, smile as you breathe, but also smile from within your thoughts, too.

Feeling as though we are carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders, we tend to react and unknowingly arch our back muscles. Allow your shoulders to drop down. Let your arms hang freely at your sides. Smile and take a few deep breaths. Be happy and at ease.

Moving on down, feel your chest for any tightness or pressure. Try and relax to open this area. Breathe naturally feeling your lungs fill, the diaphragm expand then the lungs deflate as the diaphragm drops and the breath is expelled.

Notice whether your abdominal muscles are clenched and tight. Think of the abdomen as something soft and flexible, allowing the muscles to drop and relax on their own.

Don't be in a hurry, centering can take anywhere between 10 to 20 minutes. Feel as you open the channels of awareness and sensitivity to your meditation. Now 'centered,' we can continue with the longer and deeper meditation session.

The Observer

Established in awareness, mindful of your body, feelings, thoughts and the moment, you are connected with meditation as an observer and witness. Feel how the Centering Meditation has slowed down the Everyday drive of habits to always want to be doing, thinking and discriminating. Your deepening meditation now takes you from the Everyday to the Known, from uncertainty and carelessness to a personal appreciation and understanding of your life.

With the gentle guidance of awareness as an observer, feel the flow of the present moment with your breath being the only factor for your attention. You are sensitive and attentive rather than reacting and impulsive. Notice as you do happen to think a thought of Everyday awareness a corresponding tension and pressure is felt in and around your forehead as well as the back of your eyes. Recognize these subtleties.

As an observer you view, discern, and are caring. Feel the unattached perspective of being a witness. Like viewing a work of art in a museum, you

appreciate the overall picture of breath, senses and mind. Feel the joy of meditating as you separate from your longstanding habits and impulses. Having awareness and observing, you are sensitive and open to the moment—the breath, feelings or thought.

As you witness and acknowledge, note there is no self-oriented thinking or pressured concentration. Follow the moment without judgment or criticism. Feel the difference to be a witness and observer, viewing the present moment of feelings, sensations and thoughts. Relax and allow yourself to ease into the sensitivity of the open mind of the observer. Watching, seeing, feeling, I am a witness. I see my life from a different perspective of watching and noting what's happening. This is different than a knee-jerk response. I feel myself settling down. Now continue following your breath.

The Breath

As the waves of sensation pass, acknowledge your breath. No two breaths are the same. Sometimes your shoulders will arch up with a full breath, other times the breath comes from deeper in the abdomen. Your nostrils flare slightly while a bellows-like effect of the diaphragm takes in the oxygen, the heart beats, blood pulses and circulates, then the air is expelled. There is a lot going on with one simple breath. You are a witness and aware of the present moment breath.

The breath is a sensitive gauge, revealed are the Everyday Breath and the Known Breath. Note if your attention is distracted and careless as Everyday pressures enter to bring tension to your face, neck, shoulders, and a stressed quality of breath. You only have to observe and return to the Known Breath, aware and disconnected from your habits.

Observing the breath naturally leads to a calm body which leads to a quiet mind. Awareness and understanding, everything is connected and perceived within the breath. Slowly you are separating from your all consuming self tendencies. Yes, your habit energies are quieting down.

I see the qualities of my breath. I am understanding the Everyday and the Known. I can be caught up in my desires or problems or relax and release them. Take your time to become acquainted with the many dimensions of the Everyday and the Known Breath.

The Body and Sensations

Now continue as an observer, acknowledging the pressures or tensions within and passing over your body. If your shoulders are hunched over try to relax and release any stress in them. Are your eyes squinting at the corners, forehead wrinkled with pressure, throat tight or torso tense? Recognize what you are feeling in this present moment through the subtle sensations of your body.

Don't 'think,' but investigate and observe, aware of your internal rhythms, feelings and sensations. There is a pressure in my leg, my mind has wandered from my breath, but now I relax to the moment. I have an urge to move but I sit with the impulse without giving in. Slowly I am calming down. Go deeper in the discovery of your feelings, noting the Everyday tendencies and the Known qualities. Recognize and explore each feeling and sensation of passing energy. You are with the body in calm awareness.

I feel the discomfort. I note my impulse to want to react and be rid of the pain in my leg or back, or move to scratch an itch. With my Known Breath, I exhale and release the Everyday pressures. Awareness leads to understanding and realization; habits lead to annoyance and stress. Take your time to sit with the body's feelings and sensations.

The Known Mind

Thoughts at times overwhelm the mind and the body responds with tension and pressures, making you feel even more uncomfortable and uncertain. Here you are experiencing the Everyday Breath of habits. Note how you tense up, the mind shrinks and your concentration is tight and narrow. The thought is a pinpointed experience bearing down to concentrate as a reaction to an action, moment or experience. Feel how your mind wants to zoom in and then start to think. Our concentration becomes tense as we study the thought and tension is felt behind the forehead as well as behind your eyes.

But as an observer and witness, you simply release your grip and concentration to allow the thought to disperse. Like an image fading form view, feel the thought disappear. Notice the change and quality in your breath as well as your body language as you are aware and the mind relaxes in awareness. The observer recognizes and is aware while habits have you charged, thinking, and unsettled.

There is a timelessness and freedom as you separate and disengage from Everyday thinking and the critical mind. Note the quality of a relaxed and quiet observer. The present moment of breath, body and mind unite as a calm attention. I feel how my mind has relaxed. I see how I get caught and stress squeezes me. I realize the difference in having awareness and observing and how Everyday desires tie me up in knots. Now I have awareness and know.

Meditation has allowed us to go beyond being victims to having understanding. You have experienced the reality to be aware as well as the release of Everyday pressures from desire, anger and confusion. You have experienced a personal understanding as a deeper realization. With the simple moment of quiet meditation you have had insight into the actions of your life.

Survival Meditation…Survival Practice

Listening to and witnessing people now for a few years there is a symptom called 'survival practice.' This is where the practitioner meditates only when he or she feels the urge because they are hurting, depressed, or upset. Meditation then serves as a band-aid for problems, which are much deeper. It is good that they come to take part in meditation, but this type of haphazard practice will never allow for complete awareness and peace to be realized.

Weeks will go by before you again see the person. They speak of going through some challenging times ('busy' is how they refer to it). The survival meditator will say how they have been meditating for years and yet because of not keeping a regular practice they always fall back, victim to weaknesses and overwhelmed by habits. This is like the person who joins a gym, goes for about a month and then gives in to snacking in front of the TV. Similarly, if you were going to learn to play the piano, a once a week practice wouldn't do much. Consistency and motivation are essential in a happy, successful, meditation practice and for our spiritual life. No one can do it for us. It all comes down to our own initiative. ("He keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities [desire, anger and confusion]... He is steadfast, solid in his effort…leading to the right ending of stress." AN 5, 53). For many, the support of a meditation group or

local temple is helpful. You will share in the enthusiasm and support of fellow practitioners as well as learn from sharing insight and experiences.

As we will encounter in future chapters, there are deepening insights and realizations to come from meditation. For now we will continue with these basic techniques and awareness. Our meditation practice is a benefit for all aspects of our life and can be applied to eating and walking meditation. Awareness touches all our life.

Eating Meditation

"Good Gotama [The Buddha's family name.] chews the food in the mouth two or three times and does not swallow unbroken particles, does not keep any particles in the mouth, when the next mouthful is taken. Good Gotama partakes food conscious of the taste, yet not greedy for tastes. Considering eight things good Gotama partakes food not for, play, intoxication or adornment. He partakes food to support the body, without greed for tastes, thinking I should make an end of earlier unpleasant feelings, and not arouse new, just the right amount for a pleasant abiding, without faults. After partaking food, accepting water in the bowl does not bend, raise or shake it, accepts the right amount of water. Washing the bowl does not make a sound, does not turn the bowl about, or put it on the ground to wash. With the water in the bowl he washes his fingers and with the fingers washes the bowl and throws the water not too far or too close without sprinkling it everywhere. After partaking food, he places the bowl on the ground, not too far nor too close, thinking may the bowl be of no disturbances, does not protect it too long. After the meal is over he sits silently for some time, not neglectful of a thanksgiving. When he gives the thanksgiving, it is not to debase that food or to desire some other food. It is an all round teaching, with advice, incitement, and to make the hearts light. After the thanksgiving, he gets up and goes away, not too fast, nor too slowly and not as though were relieved." **MN 91**.



All too often we sit down and gobble food in chunks without so much as appreciating, smelling or tasting what we are eating. We are eager to get back to work or are distracted.

Similar to sitting meditation, eating meditation is best experienced when possible as a moment of silence and a timeout from all our rushing around.

While it may not be possible to eat all of our meals in perfect silence and away from every distraction, while at home we certainly have control of our environment. We don't need the television blaring from the front room, the agitation translating over to our eating as we poke, stab, scoop up and stuff food into our mouths. To be fair and allow for family conversation, begin a meal with five minutes of eating in silence and then go into 'crunchy' meditation of talking softly with your spouse and children. Direct your conversations to refer only to people in the immediate room.

A good way to begin a meal is to say a few words of grace or appreciation for the moment and the food you have before you.

May this food nourish my body, further my practice, understanding and compassion.
May those without food be nourished;
May those without clothing be protected;
May those without a home have shelter
and may those who are sick and diseased, may they be cared for and cured.

Look at the food on your plate. What do you see there before you? What are you about to eat—oatmeal or fruit? Does the food have a scent? Do you feel warmth from the plate? Go ahead and begin to eat.

Feel as your arm reaches out and then your hand takes hold of the cool utensil. Curving your wrist and fingers, easily take a spoonful of oatmeal or cereal, feeling the weight of the food on the spoon. Slowly bring the spoon up towards your mouth. At this moment as you are about to place the food in your mouth, you draw in a breath (Remember, you do breathe as you eat!). Feel as your lips go on to part and how the mouth opens. The jaw drops and the tongue pulls back slightly, resting at the bottom of the mouth. The spoon slides into your mouth as the silverware touches your tongue and the warm oatmeal the roof of your mouth. Your mouth then closes around the food as the spoon is slid out through your closing lips. The thick texture of warmly cooked, cinnamon flavored oatmeal, sprinkled with raisins as well as the sweetness of honey, is absorbed by your taste buds. The tongue moves forward and back, our teeth gently breaking down the oatmeal and raisins until mashed and fine enough to swallow. Our throats open up and

the chewed food then passes down through the contracting throat muscles. The food then passes empties into and warmly fills our stomachs. This is eating with awareness and caring.

We drink water, tea, coffee or juice with a meal. Consciously reach for the glass of water. Feel the weight of the glass, how you bring it up to your mouth and there the glass gently touches your lips. You tilt the glass up, part your lips slightly and the water flows slowly into your mouth. Feel the coolness of the water and how it washes away the taste of the food. We gulp the water and it passes through the throat and on down into our stomachs. You can actually feel your stomach expanding with the addition of water. This is having awareness of drinking water.

Realistically, not all our meals or our snacks can be eaten at a leisurely pace. There are times while working through our lunch hour that we eat a sandwich at our desk while typing on the computer. But we should try taking one bite at a time from the sandwich, instilling bursts of awareness into all our moments. We are what we think and do. With each angry gulp, we are stoking our bodies with the continued energies of desire, anger and confusion. With awareness meals become a joyful experience of calmly eating and digesting.

Walking Meditation

"[The Buddha] always starts to walk with the right foot, placing the foot not too far nor too close. Does not walk too fast nor too slowly, the knees do not brush each other when walking, nor do the ankles and thighs. When walking his thighs do not writhe, bend or raise, only the lower body moves without a bodily effort. When looking he turns the whole body. He does not look up or down and does not walk with inquisitive eyes. ..." MN 91.



After breathing and thinking, the most common action of our lives is walking. We have to will ourselves to walk. If we walk with anger, we are angry. Walking with desire, we are desirous. Marching to a fantasy, we are fantasizing. Often we

arrive in a flurry, bursting through doors, closer to the running of the bulls in Pamplona. As you begin walking meditation, you will be amazed to feel the many muscles involved in taking a step and the actual rhythm to your walk.

Walking meditation can be done in a backyard, patio area, large front room or hallway, or outdoors in an open-air setting. Choose a clear distance of 20-25 feet. Before starting, stop to center yourself, taking a few deep breaths to connect with the moment then slowly begin to walk at a normal pace. Don't forget you are also breathing as you walk and to be aware of the Everyday breath!

From the buttocks stretches all the connecting muscles, which extend down the legs and allows for movement. Don't be embarrassed or think it strange, but note whether your butt is tight and stiff. Yes, the butt reflects our feelings, sensations and thoughts. There's a laugh, but it is true.

As you walk naturally release the tension carried through your abdomen, extending down into the buttocks and through your legs. We have been clinging and grasping, attached and pressured by Everyday tensions. It feels in part like a melting or an evaporation as the tension and pressure is released out through your steps. If you like, you can imagine holes at the bottom of your feet and any frustration or anxiety exiting through them.

Always moving from one place to another, we can incorporate walking meditation as we go back and forth to the photocopy machine, walk to the bathroom, to the break room, walk from our cars into the office building, walking up and down a stairway or to take out the garbage. The awareness of meditation is part of our lives.

Life Practice

You aren't alone. In every major city across meditation groups are meeting and practicing, giving guidance and support to one another as friends and practitioners.

But there is always some place to be found for a quiet moment of meditation; a bench under a tree at the college campus, in an open patio or courtyard, at a public park or in a quiet room at home. 15 to 30 minutes or

longer of sitting meditation will settle and revive you. Whatever time allows, you will be better for sitting.

Try to make some time before you rush off to work in the morning or after an especially difficult day. Feel how the business of the day lifts itself. Note all the emotional baggage and stress we tend to carry around all day with us, even to bed (after all, where do you think nightmares come from!). Sense what it is like to let go of all the longstanding urges festering inside of you and to actually rest for a moment. All the stressful energy and worry simply melts away.

An 'enemy' of meditation is sleepiness or drowsiness. As your body relaxes, the temptation to nod off is strong. You can meditate with your eyes open, staring down at a spot on the floor (light acts as a stimulus to help keep you awake). Get up and take a short walk to elevate your energy. However, your body may very well be telling you that it needs a short nap, but don't give in every time. There will be many distractions and temptations trying to pull you away from meditation. Consider everything a part of your spiritual practice, including the down times as we apply awareness.

Try setting up a spiritual room or practice corner in your home or apartment. A small altar with a Buddha statue, flowers and a place to burn incense help creates a comfortable setting for practice. Do whatever it takes to bring enthusiasm and joy to your practice.

Everything can be a meditative joy of awareness and caring. When we are at the store, we don't have to feel overwhelmed by the crowds. Walk calmly enjoying yourself. Other people may be in a hurry but you walk effortlessly. Stuck in traffic, put the car in park, take your foot off the brake and drop your hands at your sides. Take a deep breath and exhale all the stress accumulating in you. You can pleasantly do all your chores and make them a happy moment rather than gritting your teeth and fighting with yourself to finish things.

While eating, enjoy your food. Know what you are eating, its taste and texture. Feel how you chew, swallow and how the meal enters your stomach. Watch for your thoughts drifting away. Gently smile and direct yourself back to eating. Don't rush off when you finish but feel the digestive process.

Be careful of burning out. Each one of us needs to observe him or herself for stress, unhappiness or laziness. Be a friend to yourself in your practice. Don't corner or limit yourself into do's and don'ts. Notice how you knot up whenever anger, frustration, and hurry creep into your life. And notice, too, what it is like to release the tension and frustration. Be patient with yourself and others. Feel what it is like not to have an agenda.

Meditation is a realized understanding of peace in our lives.

Chapter Three

LOVING-KINDNESS—
Compassion for One's Self...Compassion for the World



"I call on you to stop! Can you not hear me, monk? Stop...Stop!"

Angulimala, the known murderer, was running, approaching the Buddha from behind. The Buddha continued walking slowly, looking straight ahead. Again, Angulimala yelled. The Buddha walked on. Breathless, Angulimala

caught up to the Buddha. They stopped and looked at each other.

"I ordered you to stop." Angulimala gasped for air. He had a long knife slung to his belt. Around his neck was a grotesque garland of fingers taken from each of his murder victims. "I ordered you to stop and yet you continued."

The Buddha looked into Angulimala's eyes then spoke in an even voice. "I have stopped my running, Angulimala, have you stopped yours? Angulimala, I have stopped forever. I abstain from violence towards living beings. But you have no restraint towards things that live. This is why I have stopped running and you have not stopped running…"

They stared at each other. Angulimala shuddered then dropped to his knees and wept at the Buddha's feet. MN 86.

"Hatred never ceases through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law." DH 5.

Opening to Loving-Kindness



Things are going well in your life. You are enthusiastic about the journey and your practice. Then all at once you feel cold. You glance over your shoulder. The wind picks up. A storm is approaching, some trouble or difficulty. Now you are frightened and uncertain. How do you handle the problem?

Do we fight, name call, seek revenge, hate, cry, run away, or ignore the situation or person? This is what we have

always done. Loving-kindness is a true potential to help us deal with difficult situations and persons, challenges, and overcome hardships, cruelty and hatred.

There are countless long enduring sitters, others who fast, while others who can expound discourses and texts at great length. But where is their compassion? Where are gratitude and generosity? Where are forgiveness and fellowship? Where are patience and caring? The awareness of loving-kindness is a defining experience for all of us.

On the first day of a loving-kindness seminar I attended some years back, no sooner had the facilitator started her introduction, when one apprehensive man interrupted. Unsettled, he spoke of his confusion and hesitance about loving-kindness. He didn't know what he was doing at the workshop. The facilitator was confident and not at all unnerved by the man. Since that day, I have always wondered what I would say to anyone who was as equally dubious and resistant about loving-kindness.

It is normal to react with doubt and even feel the opposite, threatened and revulsion, to anything that is new and different in our lives. If someone only knows despair, has been rebuffed, or comes from a history of abuse, how else can they be expected to react to the 'novelty' of loving-kindness? We need a moment to get used to our new surroundings.

Our spiritual journey embraces a threefold awareness. Nourished first by meditation, we slow down from our over reactive impulsive nature to do and become. Second, once slowing down we then have the direct experience of our impulsive nature and understand how we are always in motion and busy with thoughts, doing and becoming. Finally, our budding awakening through awareness and caring naturally leads to loving-kindness and compassion which help us resolve, transform, and bring peace into our lives. We now have the sensitivity and appreciation to cultivate loving-kindness and compassion.

Let's look at a true life-experience from the Buddha and how he shared loving-kindness.

Angulimala, the Converted Murderer



Of all the Buddha's encounters, his meeting with Angulimala, the murderer, quoted at the beginning, is the most revealing and perhaps the most 'awakening' or helpful of the Buddha's experiences for us to know and apply to our lives. The confrontation is a great compassionate moment. Here in this life-threatening situation, the Buddha has shared his insight, shown unconditional love and compassion, offered healing, acted without prejudice, was without fear and dealt without harming.

What did the Buddha mean by his cryptic remark to Angulimala, "I have stopped my running, have you stopped yours?" What running was the Buddha referring to? The running and domination of all our habits and impulses, which have contributed to our idea of self and ego; the never-ending 'running' or 'desire' within us which is the cause for all of our being unsettled and problems. The Buddha had finished with his 'running' (his struggles with selfish habits and impulses) and boldly brought out to Angulimala his own wild and murderous actions. Our own histories have made us victims, cornered us into a never-ending cycle of blind and harmful actions. Angulimala's case is but an extreme example. We aren't as free as we think we are.

The Buddha saw through the sheer, psychological veil and understood the anger and bitterness not of Angulimala, 'the murderer,' but of a man made victim from so many cruel sources. What Angulimala did was wrong, but he was wronged into his desperate acts. This isn't about trying to make excuses for barbarous acts or forgetting the victims, but trying to bring understanding and compassion to our consciousness. Under different conditions and influences, Angulimala would have turned out to be a gentle and responsible man.

The Buddha exemplified unconditional love and compassion. The selfish view only for ourselves separates us from the world and stops us from connecting and feeling loving-kindness. Filled with longstanding prejudice,

passing verdicts and self-serving motives, we strangle our compassion. Angulimala was accepted as he was, not for what he wasn't or for what he was lacking. This is having the compassion to see and understand beyond our narrow scope of judgments and bias.

If you step on a flower, will it grow and blossom? The flower will try but if each day it is stepped on, finally it will wither and die. In a sense, this is what happened to Angulimala. We all start with the potential to be a flower, but somewhere along the way, we are stepped on, abused and neglected. While a flower shrivels up and dies, a human becomes angry, bitter and potentially violent. The Buddha shared non-harming. We don't return violence with violence, seek revenge or wish suffering. From our thoughts and actions, there is only good will.

Here, for the first time in history, a known murderer and criminal was accepted into a spiritual practice or religious setting. However, this didn't happen without repercussions. A search party was formed by King Kosala to track down Angulimala and bring him to justice. Some time later the search party encountered the Buddha and a group of monks on alms round. The Buddha saw the armed soldiers as well as the King himself, and asked what was wrong.

"We search for the murderer, Angulimala," the King explained.

"But suppose," the Buddha went on to ask, "you were to see Angulimala with his head shaved, wearing the yellow robes, having left his past life and finished with killing, what then would you do?"

"I would worship him then," said King Kosala.

The Buddha called Angulimala to step forward. The King and his troops were startled to see the murderer now a monk. He was left in the Buddha's charge. But things for Angulimala weren't finished so easily as he was beaten and bloodied by villagers still angry for his past violence. The newly ordained monk accepted the consequences without hatred or bitterness. Even the Buddha was impressed with Angulimala's dramatic turn-around and his dedication to practice. If generosity, loving-kindness and compassion could change Angulimala, couldn't understanding and caring transform the world's suffering and hatred?

Staying at a friend's ranch in the San Joaquin Valley, I was witness to a remarkable transformation. One day a large dog roamed around the property. Eventually it was welcomed on to the ranch and fed near the house. The dog growled, menaced and lunged to attack.

Over a period of years, Moose (as the dog was named for its size) went from a snarling, biting beast to a gentle, fun-loving puppy. In the beginning whenever the dog was on edge and wanting to bite he was isolated and reprimanded. Then over time, with socializing and hearing kind voices, receiving the basic necessities of food and shelter which every creature needs, Moose went on to become the darling of the ranch. I was amazed.

Loving-kindness can calm savage creatures and transform hardened people. They simply didn't know or have other choices available to them. Consider how fortunate you are to now have awareness and caring brightening the way for you. In a civilized society we don't accept bad behavior, we offer compassion.

Gratitude



A first step towards a full embracing, awareness and compassion is gratitude. We begin by showing gratitude for everything that we already have. We are grateful for our many friends and our family who care and help us, (despite the personal conflicts that do crop up from time-to-time between us). We are grateful for the warm meal nourishing our bodies while there are so many people without food. We express gratitude for the clothing that protects us, and for the medicine that heals us. On this basic level we are all truly fulfilled.

Our morning orange juice or the cup of coffee we drink is made available because of farmers and pickers (not to mention nature). The newspaper funnies we glance over have been made available by people working long hours at a printing press. We bring in empty garbage cans thanks to the refuse collector disposing our smelly waste. We drive off to work because of the efforts of the assembly line, the mechanic and the people maintaining

the roads. The bus driver more often than not, arrives on time and gets us to work. The copy machine technician services the machine on the blink. The school nurse tends to our feverish children. The bag boy helps with our groceries. The postal worker delivers our correspondence. The gardener and the roofer provide their services. Having gratitude makes a difference.

Loving-Kindness Meditation



As with all meditations, we sit and get a feel for the moment: where we are, body sensations, what we are thinking, and a brief body scan, relaxing any physical pressures and releasing mental tensions. We breathe deeply three or four times to make contact with our breathing and body.

Before we can ever begin to share our loving-kindness, our goodwill and generosity, we must know peace within ourselves. Otherwise we really are offering a less than complete and honest compassion. There is a need for healing and a rightful closure to the chapters of suffering in our lives. Begin by understanding and acknowledging your own pain and torment.

I have been hurt, wounded, lied to and betrayed. Yes, it happens to everyone. I feel my sorrows and all the pain, the many let downs, rejections and shortcomings. There has been confusion and anger over the years. But all along, what I have really been doing is hating myself and being my own worst enemy. I see how I have been holding on to all my upsets and torments.

May I forgive and let go of my anger and bitterness. It has to end sometime, somehow. Otherwise I only bring more suffering to myself. I must forgive in order to live in peace. May there finally be forgiveness and acceptance. I finally understand my sorrow and how it has affected me.

I know my father neglected me. My mother was very severe and showed me little love. My lover or mate went on to betray me. I understand and know my pain. May I stop tormenting myself and let go of my bitterness. I can be a friend to myself. Happiness and well-being can be a part of my life.

May I forgive myself, too. I don't have to suffer. What happened was a long time ago. There is no use whipping myself. What good does picking at old wounds do? May I be happy. May I release my sorrows. Try to feel patience, acceptance and understanding to whatever degree you are capable of and know that caring and compassion are elements within you needing nurturing.

As a final sharing, try to extend loving-kindness, well wishes, concern, and sympathy to those people who are difficult to deal with on a daily basis and with whom we regularly show impatience.

I know that things haven't always been good between us. We have had some friction in the past but right now I hope things are going well for you. I hope that your problems go on to work themselves out. I hope you can forgive me and have patience for me. I have come to better understand my shortcomings and I hope you can, too. I understand you better after knowing my own anger and upset. Sometimes I am not the easiest person to get along with and ask for your understanding and support. Let's meet half way.

One way of establishing a deeper contact with difficult people is to refer to the two of you together in the third person plural—'we.' The thoughts for each person are made more real. Using 'we,' no longer is the other person distant or anonymous, but we have actually joined with them in forgiveness and healing. A shared moment of compassion opens us to other people and their personal situations.

It can be argued that when all has been said and done that the other person will still remain difficult. Of what use is our loving-kindness meditation? In the end, we have changed and grown. How could we go back to being the bitter, angry, vindictive person of yesterday? We have opened ourselves to compassion and peace. Not everything is suffering and anger. In the least we offer non-harming to a challenging person or aggressor. We offer good intentions and are accountable for our own actions. If the other person chooses to hold a grudge then they must live with their lives. We sympathize with everyone's suffering as our own and offer blessings and compassion to their torment-plagued lives. The decisive question is "where is my compassion?"

As you have witnessed, loving-kindness brings to the forefront our true humanity; all our wrinkles and scars as well as our most noble attributes. A

nurturing and open communication with ourselves and for others develops. We come to see others as a friend rather than an enemy or a threat. Loving-kindness isn't about being Mary Poppins, but is a positive option rather than dishing out anger and blame. Adding a short loving-kindness moment to your regular meditation practice helps establish your compassionate nature. Some of the rewards of loving-kindness are restful sleep, waking easier, being endeared and closer to others, a sharper mind and dying unconfused and at peace. Hostility and bitterness can be transformed to a generous and caring person.

Inner Child Meditation



Within each of us is an inner child that consists of: all of our memories and experiences; all the joy as well as the many tears shed, fears of dark rooms or spiders and, unfortunately, sometimes deep trauma. Most people have had a happy childhood. The memories of birthday parties, special visits with grandparents, and weekend nature excursions made for a healthy growing-up. But there are others who haven't been as fortunate. There may have been abusive or neglectful parents, loud fighting and divorce, a nightmare of sexual abuse, or just not enough love (our parents are a product of their own unfortunate childhood). We carry these early torments around with us. They are real. We couldn't be anyone else. But we can bring understanding, compassion and healing to our inner child.

Try smiling in awareness at your inner child—a gentle, caring smile. Not trying to cover up any cruelty, but a smile where we acknowledge and realize ourselves as a younger person in a friendly and positive way. Aware and caring, we are able to acknowledge that we do have unresolved issues. But how many troubled people are unable to admit to their past? They lash out projecting the cruelty and pain of the inner child on to everyone they come in contact with.

Continue smiling gently, understanding your inner child, knowing that you have deep wounds and emotional scars from the past. I have come to visit

with you, my friend. I understand that you are hurt. Now together we can understand.

I am truly sorry that you have suffered and that things haven't always been well for you. Yes, you were neglected. Yes, you were abused. The suffering was horrible all those many years. How could it have happened—to me...to me! I see all the cruelty. I see the pain. I embrace you. You aren't alone. There has been a lot of heartache, but can we try to step away from it? Try and feel that not everything is suffering. Look around you. Don't be scared. Not everything is trying to hurt you. I am here with you, my inner child. I have come as a friend. I am older now and though I still have pain, we can get to know each other and see that we aren't alone. I smile with you here, my friend. You aren't alone.

Smile now in forgiveness. I see how my past has brought me pain and suffering here today. I forgive you, my past, my inner child. I know that it wasn't your fault. You are innocent. I see the anger I have been holding onto from vicious parents. They made me the bitter person I now am, but I can't continue living this way. I am only hurting myself. I forgive you, mother and father, for bringing me pain and suffering. You did nothing wrong, my friend. You are a survivor.

Smile now through your tears, should you be crying. It is all right to cry. You have understood the pain and trauma, bringing healing and peace to yourself. Now go on and try to live a happy life. Be patient and forgiving as memories and flash backs erupt from time-to-time. You have touched forgiveness and love for yourself. You can smile and know peace.

What is Love?



Loving-kindness leads us to ask of ourselves, what is love and what role does affection and caring play in our spiritual awakening? Love is certainly one of the most compelling feelings and motives in being human. From our birth, we crave and reach out for love. A mother's and father's love nourishes us. Infants without love suffer emotional damage. In one respect,

everything we do, our relationships and experiences with others, is a call to know love. However, love is often confused with sex, self-fulfillment, or expressed as a control.

Where is the magic sung about in the Oscar-Hammerstein lyric, 'Some Enchanted Evening'—"Some enchanted evening you will see a stranger across a crowded room?" These encounters of dazzling romance have less to do with love and more to do with desire. The next time you see someone who strikes you as attractive, honestly ask yourself why? Is it because he or she fits your idea of beauty (which is part cultural as well as from our upbringing)? Does he or she remind us of someone or an affair from the past? Do we like his or her smile, perfume or cologne, the clothes they wear? Is their voice soothing? Or on a much deeper level, not having received enough attention or love in our own lives, do we crave that 'enchanting' person to fill a void for what is lacking in our own lives? These are tough questions. Facing them head on leads us towards understanding and opening to sincere compassion rather than fulfilling passions. Already, if you are practicing meditation on a regular basis, your habits and impulses have slowed down enough to become clearer as to why we do the things we do. Now love, too, is exposed and understood.

Feel the desire to have or to be needed, and how it escalates to a driving sexual urge. We 'see' someone. Our eye senses come into focus and go from 'seeing' to 'liking', and then just as quickly jump to 'craving,' and explode to outright 'sexual desire,' needing to possess the other person we see across a crowded room.

Most people aren't honest with themselves, preferring to look the other way, falling into and out of relationships without understanding why. But again, everything is a part of our spiritual awakening, even the lows of a break up, a nasty divorce, or the short-lived affair. Why can't I find love? What is wrong with me? Why do I always seem to attract the wrong kind of problem-filled lovers who turn out to be just like all the other losers before? Why can't I be alone for one night instead of running off with the first person that comes my way? Everyone else is married with children, what is wrong with me? Well, I guess I just better settle down with the next person who comes along. What can I get out of this person? What are they going to do for me?

Love (or the pretending of love!) has many disguised forms. There is Romantic Love, which is a fantasy and delusion of not truly seeing people for who and what they are. This is all about a 'fireworks show' of passion. There is Sexual Love, which satisfies urges and pleasure-seeking but remains only on a physical, gratifying level while the overall relationship suffers or probably never existed except in bed. There is the Wounded Heart Love, which calls and craves for healing from childhood needs or family conflicts; falling in love is an attempt at covering up the past. And there is Possessive Love, which is insecure and seeks to control and suffocate rather than communicate.

Where does all this leave us? Can there be love? Does it even exist? Fortunately, there are more rewarding and truthful relationships. We now understand what has compelled us to run after someone. We aren't out to deceive or hurt anyone, least of all ourselves.

Once and for all, try and understand that to love and to share compassion, doesn't mean you have to go for what is between the other person's legs or love on a sexual level only! But on the contrary, love means to see the other person for who they are. We can hope for their safety, well being, and good fortune without thinking that we have to bed them and live happily ever after in courtships and domesticity. Is there a greater love than this? No between-the-sheets lover could ever be so generous, noble or caring. No orgasm or climax could be as fulfilling as someone who wants the best for you. This is love as understanding and compassion. This is love without judgments or expectations; a love that is open and based on awareness and good will.

We Are the Compassionate Ones



Here, then, is the challenge for greater understanding. Do we sit and reserve our practice only for the meditation cushion? Is our understanding only an intellectual deception? Of course, problems and difficulties will come our way and are a part of life, but awareness and caring have naturally lead us to transcend these moments with loving-kindness and compassion.

This is the springboard to a deepening spiritual practice. Here we cross over from being a hotheaded, impatient person to being a 'compassionate one.'

Daily, there are drivers who cut us off on the freeway. Someone speaks rudely to us. Small mindedness is directed at us from a co-worker. A family member's or friend's words wound us. We lash out ignorantly without understanding or having awareness and caring. The act of compassion comes from an awakened and caring person, who offers good will and concern. Loving-kindness is the natural next step of development and personal experience on our spiritual journey.

Unfortunately, loving-kindness is at times seen as something frivolous, romantic, and tied to emotions. Even a few senior monastics misunderstand and look down upon the practice as petty and sentimental. On the contrary, loving-kindness sensitively connects us to an awareness and appreciation with long-ignored personal issues, problems and habitual, destructive patterns of living. A dialogue of forgiveness, acceptance and understanding develops rather than hatred, fear or bitterness. The rewards of loving-kindness practice have a more complete effect as a spiritual tool than years of pain-staking sacrifice and withdrawn practice. Once I was challenged by a hard driven monk to do 1,000 prostrations. I turned to him and said I would do them if he would chant the Discourse on Loving-Kindness 1,000 times. There is already too much pain in the world. Compassion is needed.

When we look deeply into our suffering and sorrows it is with the awareness and caring of loving-kindness to understand, heal and transform the pain, anger or upset. This is having true awareness. Wisdom and understanding without loving-kindness is still being ignorant to a degree.

Life Practice

Make a vow as you wake each day that you will offer kindness, and generosity, share and do favors, and have patience with others. This includes yourself.

Smile more, smile much more. Smile as things get hectic around the office. Have humor and be light hearted rather instead of tense and edgy. Don't allow pressures to overwhelm you, but offer the situation or the other person a smile. An air of patience and tolerance is infused. Smiling, we radiate confidence, trust, happiness, kindness and generosity.

If you feel the urge to snap back at someone or become angry, step away from the situation. Try having the patience to hear the other person out without taking what is being said as a personal attack ("Knowing that the other person is angry, one who remains mindful and calm acts for his own best interest and for the other's interest, too." SN 1, 162.). Feel how by being patient situations and communication with people actually do improve. Even if nothing changes at least you aren't enraged and out of control. After calmly listening to disparaging remarks from one man, the Buddha responded that he wouldn't accept the other person's 'gift of anger!'

Everything we do involves and is compassion linked—how we speak to people during the day and the tone we use; handing something over and how we offer it, driving and taking our time, letting another driver squeeze in, or pushing ahead with road rage; helping someone complete something, entering or leaving a room calmly; sharing what we can when we can and not hoarding. Compassion is our method and our reward; the measuring rod of our lives; our true gain and salvation.

Should hateful or angry thoughts come up during the day, try offering an immediate mental blessing towards the situation or the person. Say to yourself, have a nice day. I won't be angry. I'll bend. May there be peace. Do anything except yield to your first impulsive reaction to be angry. Try feeling disappointment rather than rage. You are capable of caring, gentleness and loving-kindness. Gradually compassion will become a natural extension of your person.

Volunteer whenever possible (even if only on weekends or holidays) is a way of renewing our ties with compassion and loving-kindness. Other people in turn are touched by our generosity and inspired to help. All of our efforts to share loving-kindness do make a difference. Maybe not immediately or as we would like, but always as an offering of peace.

Compassion cannot be denied.

Chapter Four

THE MONKEY MIND—
Distractions and Concentration



"When a person lives heedlessly, his craving grows like a creeping vine. He runs now here and now there, as if looking for fruit: a monkey in the forest." DH 334

"Abandoning what's first, they depend on what's next. Following distraction, they don't cross over attachment. They embrace and reject—like a monkey releasing a branch to seize at another—a person undertaking practices on his own, goes high and low, latched onto

perception. But having clearly known…having encountered the Dharma, one of profound discernment doesn't go high and low." SN 4, 4

A Wild Monkey



Like a monkey hopping about, wildly chattering and swinging from one vine to the next, we are easily distracted. Our judgment is impaired, our actions impulsive. We are provoked and respond. This is how we loose our way and find ourselves suffering and upset.

Desire/Craving—What do I have to do to find the woman or man of my dreams…Have a red convertible…How about…What I wouldn't do for a …This would be nice but I first want.

Hatred/Aversion—I don't want to...You're wrong…Get away from me…I hate you…I'm not doing that…You scare me…I don't trust you…I don't like this.

Dullness/Fatigue—I just don't know what to do any more…I've tried everything. Anyway it's always the same…What am I supposed to do…It can all wait until tomorrow...It's not going to matter anyway…I'm tired…I need a break.

Restlessness/Worry—I can't sit and meditate…I don't feel right unless I'm busy…There's always something that needs to be done…I don't know why I did it—I just had to…That's just the way I am…I can't stop.

Doubt/Skepticism—I can't do it…I was never any good…It's better if I don't…It doesn't matter what I do…This is the way it's always been.

Does any of this sound like someone you know? Does it seem a bit like a family member, friend, or co-worker? You might be shaking or dropping your head right now. Could it be? A little too close for comfort, it sounds a lot like one's own self! Who is in control, you or your Monkey Mind?

No sooner do we get out of bed and our feet touch the floor, thoughts begin clicking away: what we need to do; what we should do; what we don't want to do; what we would like to do and what needs to get done. Our minds flash as fast as shuffled cards. Awareness and concentration suffer and habit tendencies follow. Unable to keep up with all the stimulation and events, we are stressed and confused. The present moment is an overwhelming experience. Even our sleep is disturbed by dreams brought on by our compulsive ways.

Try this short test. Sit alone at your dining table or at your front room sofa and observe what happens. Do your thoughts quiet down? Are you looking around the room for something that interests you or reeling off thoughts and imagined scenarios? Does the slightest sound, movement or shadow lead your thoughts astray? Did you conjure up memories—some family squabble, a former romance or favorite fantasy?

Don't be hard on yourself. There are few people whose attention is calm and concentrated. Ironically, most people have an actual suspicion and fear of being quiet and calm, assuming that we should be occupied, pushing ourselves to the limit and always on the go. Or are we really acting out of impatience and impulse?

The Boredom Factor and the Past in the Present



When a moment or experience doesn't hold our attention, isn't meaningful, stimulating or satisfying, we fall prey and are victimized by boredom. How many times have you been talking face-to-face with a person when your mind wanders off to think about another person, fantasize shopping, or being someplace else?

Boredom can be looked at as a form of hate or aversion. In a less menacing way, we are tuning out, 'hating' the other person or the moment. Boredom and the reasons behind boredom are such a strong influence all on their own that it needs to be examined. Boredom is sneaky in how quickly it sidetracks us.

You can be watching a movie, cutting vegetables, or driving along when boredom draws you away. Our minds and thoughts like a challenge.

Probably the single most boring and distracting moment for all of us is going to the bathroom. It isn't exactly something that is brought up in polite company, but serves as a good example. Distracting thoughts, humming some long forgotten tune, pondering a problem, thinking about running an errand and even paying taxes overtake us while we sit in the bathroom.

Once our attention is bored, the Monkey Mind and our habit nature swing into action, the past promoting our future, divorcing us from the present moment. Although boredom is the first instance in the breakdown of our concentration, the specific distractions are more complicated. The original word from the Pali, *nivarana*, means to cover up or obscure our awareness. When our attention and concentration is 'covered over,' we aren't understanding things. Distraction is like having sunglasses on all the time—true reality doesn't filter through and we react unwisely.

After the Buddha had addressed a group of monks, Ven. Maha Kaccana was asked to further explain the connection between our perceptions and the past, and our experiences and distractions. ***"…What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind). What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. Based on what a person complicates, the perceptions and categories of complication assail him or her with regard to past, present, and future forms cognizable...With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind). What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. Based on what a person complicates, the perceptions and categories of complication assail him or her with regard to past, present, and future ideas cognizable via the intellect." MN 18.***

Like a grainy, 8mm film of a family get together, we splice and edit from old footage as we discredit the present moment. Who could ever imagine that there is another side to things other than how we perceive them to be? We find it unbelievable that we have to change, adapt and allow for other people in our lives and are surprised that we aren't believed or understood.

Take for example, a couple, a man and a woman, entering a room. We glance their way and immediately begin sizing them up. I like her but not him. He reminds me of so and so. He is arrogant and can't be trusted. But

she seems sweet. She has a kind face like my favorite aunt. I'm going to watch out for him though.

Here we have judged and discriminated, all on what evidence? We have distracted and distorted the moment through our habit nature of limited past memories and experiences. The mind is forever changing gears from past to present, present to past. There can be similarities but the two are separate moments and experiences.

Here is another example. Tired from a demanding and stressful day at work, our mind wanders. The children are playing loudly in their room. There is one piercing scream too many and we explode into a tirade and our exhaustion spills over to take it all out on the kids.

Our conscious awareness is similar to a computer. Everything we have experienced and know is downloaded and collected in our hard drive-like minds. We have quite a collection of stored memory files. These experiences are our very own personal operating system, which manage how we view and deal with the world. At instantaneous speeds, memories are associated with the present moment. Just like our computers at home or work, there are corrupt files, crashes, program problems, or overload. The computer analogy only serves as an example to help us appreciate how we misinterpret things. We are alive and dynamic, a living and breathing phenomenon of experience but, also, we are subject to being distracted and distorting things. This is how the Monkey Mind leads us around.

The Five Distractions



Distractions come in different forms and disguises but the Buddha categorized them into five groups in what he called the Five Hindrances. These Five Hindrances or Distractions cause our concentration and understanding to be confused and unreasonable—desire (sensual desire), hatred (ill-will), mental fatigue (sloth and torpor), worry and guilt (restlessness and remorse), doubt (skeptical doubt).

The Buddha compares each of the five distractions to a particular impurity of water. To see things through a pool of water, the water (our minds) has to be clear and calm.

The Wandering Mind (Sensual Desire and Craving)
Like so many bright colors gleaming and reflecting on a water's surface, we are side tracked by sensual stimulation as wells as our desires. Our attention flutters, seeking after something interesting and enticing.

As a distraction, the Wandering Mind begins bored. But behind the boredom there is also a deeper impetus of the past. We may think or believe that our wanting and going after something is our own free will, but from having a favorite color to not getting by without a particular article or having an emotional longing, desire and craving are formed by past associations.

The fallout of desire is that it is unending. It is the itch that you can't stop scratching as desire feeds on desire. Our bored and distracted thoughts are a constant temptation. We are left reeling and out of control. Seemingly harmless, we pretend and deceive ourselves that it is all right to desire. The harm is that desire gains momentum until we have lost control. The Wandering Mind is like that of a child in a candy store, who looks around wanting to taste everything. In the end we make ourselves sick.

As you proceed with your day, notice how your thoughts are easily distracted. There's a pretty blouse. Look at that new sports car. Closer to a dream, we disregard our families and loved ones. But there is awareness of the present moment. Everything else is fantasy and a delusion.

Even our meditation and practice can be a focus of desire as we look for and expect certain outcomes. We want to be 'enlightened.' We are looking for a special spiritual teacher, guide or group. On the short term, desires are enjoyable like a vacation. But at some point we all have to wake up and the vacation ends. No matter how hard we try, tension, problems, stress and conflicts creep back in. Awareness and caring are the common sense bridge, connecting us with our real lives.

The Whining Mind (Ill-will and Aversion)
Ill-will, hatred, anger—our minds froth like boiling water. Boiling water is unrecognizable, steaming and clouded. It is also painful. We all know what it is like to get angry—feeling flushed and hot all over, tense and tight, eyes

bugging out, your heart races and head pounds while feeling as though steam is coming out of your ears.

Many times we are comparing, judging and looking down at people or situations. The present moment becomes a battleground as we are lost to our warped perceptions. But where did these harsh thoughts come from? Again, the past affecting the present is the key influence.

Practicing as a monastic, I found myself alone for two weeks as the others were away. In the first few days my mind was sharp, aware and caring. But something happened half way into my time alone. Hatred and anger began cropping up. Instances of past arguments, disagreements, unhappiness and conflicts manifested themselves in whatever I was doing or thinking. Yet I had nothing to be angry about since I was alone. Using the technique of Right Questioning, I asked myself how could it be that whatever I was doing in the present that an angry recollection from the past could so dominate my every thought and blur my concentration?

Unaware and sidetracked, my mind was subtly bored and wandered off (boredom the initial catalyst). I had allowed myself to be distracted. Something happened in my practice at this point as an understanding of clarity and awareness had exposed my weakness. Realizing that it was my concentration or awareness which had a momentary lapse, I refocused and applied myself to whatever I was doing in the present moment of cleaning, eating, meditating, working, walking or chanting. I was aware of my situation, understood my distraction and lack of concentration. I was happy to have exposed the Whining Mind. This is what it is meant by having direct experience as an insight.

If you were to add up how many times a day you complain about things, criticize someone, pass judgment, discriminate, have false expectations, you would be amazed. Every few seconds we are ‘whining’ to ourselves about something. As sneaky as desire, the final outcome of the Whining Mind can lead to an outburst of anger.

Aversion is the other extreme of the hatred spectrum. When we don’t like something or are unable to cope, we want to flee, are fearful and uncertain. Past fears and doubts bubble up, nothing goes right and in our agitation we make everything wrong. If we aren’t right then everyone is wrong! But things are rarely as bad or as one sided as we make them out to be.

Ill-will can be an uncomfortable challenge. We need patience to slowly become familiar with the workings of the mind and impulsive thought process.

The Sluggish Mind (Dullness or Sloth and Torpor)
Like water covered over with moss, stagnant and not circulating, the Sluggish Mind is unclear and distorted. Rigid and dull, we are out of touch. Reality seems distant and unreachable. A fog hangs over us.

In the throes of depression or fatigue, a heaviness and resistance overtakes us. We have all seen children who dawdle rather than do something that they are told to do or would prefer not doing. The Sluggish Mind is the adult version of lying down and giving up. Oh, I can do that later. I'm tired. Now is not the right time. We are all very good at deceiving ourselves and being in denial.

The Black Cloud Mind (Restlessness and Remorse)
Restlessness and worry are like water churned up by strong winds, whipped by waves. When the distractions overwhelm us they disturb our equilibrium, preventing us from being calm and having insight.

It is like being under a proverbial black cloud of negativity. The Black Cloud Mind is worried and unsure, nervous and irritable. A mind on edge and confused, the Black Cloud Mind is a symptom of an over reactive mind. We can't connect with reality because we are unsettled and anxious. Life rushes by in a whirl. In the beginning of our spiritual practice there can be a great deal of restlessness, especially during meditation. We aren't used to sitting and the quiet. Habit actions and impulsive reactions have been our norm and creep up to get the better of us. Restless, we also project our anxiety onto the present.

How would you treat a nervous guest visiting you? Be a friend to the Black Cloud Mind. Make it feel at ease and welcome. Don't fight or get caught up with the restlessness. What agitation are you feeling—where in your body? Take a couple of deep breaths to exhale and disperse your anxiety. Be calm and allow for awareness to refocus your attention. Allow the

negative energy to flow naturally on its own rather than damming it up and holding onto it.

The Quicksand Mind (Skeptical Doubt)

Thick, gooey and sludge-like, skeptical doubt is a muddied perception making a wasteland of our lives. This is the Quicksand Mind. Frightened and made insecure by the past, the present is an unwelcome and unsteady experience. We struggle and sink in a mire of distractions. Everything around us seems remote and unfriendly. Insecurity and apprehension drive a wedge between us and the world. Nothing seems right.

The Quicksand Mind is potentially the most difficult and threatening distraction because it is filled with subtle negativity and a deeper defeatist attitude. We become our own worst enemy through doubt, paralyzing us from making decisions. We start something, quickly stop, go to the next, run off and go around and around without ever committing or accomplishing anything. The lack of self-esteem on our part all stems from past experiences. Anxious, fearful and doubting, past insecurities form imagined distractions.

There is a fabled story of a monk, who living in a cave, painted a tiger on a rock wall. When the monk had finished he stood back to take in his effort. He flinched in fear because the tiger appeared menacingly real. When distracted by the Quicksand Mind we imagine or make things out to be far worse than they are.

Regarding our spiritual practice, the Quicksand Mind is the most harmful because it can cause us to give up practice and also because it prevents us from understanding ourselves and deeper truths. Everyone else is having a good meditation but me. Why can't I stop all my worrying? Who needs practice and all this silly meditation? The doubter sets him or herself up with unrealistic expectations and then when they fail, stops practicing all together.

Confessing a poignant experience, a young woman spoke up at a weekly Dharma gathering and shared her challenging weekend. She was having problems with her car and began looking through the weekend newspapers for better transportation. She then began second-guessing and doubting herself as to what kind of car she would need. She was single but then

contemplated whether one day she would be married and perhaps with children and whether a larger sedan verses a smaller car would be appropriate. She went on to bemoan the fact that she was single and all her friends were married, most having children. She cried about her life and what to do. In the end she laughed. She decided to stay with her old car and to be happy as she was.

Overcoming the Distractions—
Concentration, Clarity and Understanding



Whenever we think, look at something and simply experience anything, we are using our attention and concentration. However, we take our experiences for granted and what we end up doing is plunging carelessly into the moment and becoming confused through impulsive reactions. Though seeming technical, the Five Awareness Penetrations (Absorption Factors) to be described take us deeper into meditative awareness and connect us with the life experience before us. The Penetrations demonstrate in a practical way not only how to slow down and develop concentrated awareness, but also how to harness the Monkey Mind.

The Five Awareness Penetrations (Absorption Factors)
Initial Contact
Sustained Contact
Interest
Joy
One-pointedness

Initial Contact takes place when our awareness is first scratched or 'itched.' An action has made 'contact' with us, and our consciousness focuses in its direction. If an ant were to crawl on you, you wouldn't immediately notice it. There would be a light, quick sensation or contact. Here our awareness is vague and not yet focused. Initial Contact stirs our attention.

Sustained Contact is our awareness having made contact with the subject as we feel a crawling sensation over our skin. At this point we haven't yet looked over nor do we know what the itching is, but our curiosity has been stimulated. Sustained Contact fixes and draws our attention towards the crawling ant.

Interest occurs after the curiosity of sustained contact as we glance over with the awareness of interest to see the ant crawling along on our arm. Here awareness is contacted but has not yet quite absorbed with the present moment.

Joy (though in the case of an ant this may not exactly be joyful) refers to the 'joy' as our attention is fully aware and cognizant of the ant or the subject. It is considered a 'joy' to know and be aware in the present moment. At this point we haven't acted or reacted by way of our habit and impulsive nature. We are abiding in the feeling and knowing (or 'joy') of our attention fully connected with the subject, the ant.

One-pointedness is achieved as we knowingly focus our awareness, connecting with the subject. Before any acting or reacting on our part, we are absorbed and focused as we watch the ant crawl along our arm. There is nothing distracting us.

As you can see, awareness is quickly engaged, but through meditation we have learned to slow down. Our feelings, sensations and thoughts aren't haphazard. We are fulfilled and at peace to finally subdue the Monkey Mind. You may now blow the imaginary ant off your arm! Take a deep breath and relax for a moment.

Another example of the Awareness Penetrations is to consider them like trying to open a door in the dark. Initial contact is groping to find the door knob, sustained contact occurs as we pass our hand over and touch the door knob, interest is keeping our hand on the door knob, joy is bringing out the key with the other hand and one-pointedness is the concentration we use to insert the key and unlock the door in the dark. Like a mime moving slowly through his act, the break down of the awareness penetrations serves to show how our attention focuses to concentrate.

In traditional practice, the Five Awareness Penetrations and the Five Distractions of the Monkey Mind are connected on a one-to-one level. Each

penetration relates to and blocks out a distraction. Initial contact shuts out dullness and drowsiness. Sustained contact puts away doubt. Interest subdues ill-will. Joy overcomes restlessness and worry. One-pointedness of mind counteracts sensual desire. Developing the Five Awareness Penetrations, the Monkey Mind is subdued.

When the Five Distractions are brought under control, awareness enters into what is known as 'neighborhood' concentration (access concentration), approaching the 'neighborhood' of clear and unobstructed concentration or unwavering one-pointedness. The Five Distractions have been controlled but concentration is not very deep nor is it been held for very long. This is like being a child who is learning to walk. Our concentration may still have moments of wobbliness, but awareness is becoming stronger.

Now try applying the Awareness Penetrations as a concentration exercise to understand as well as harness your impulsive Monkey Mind. Sit as you normally would for meditation but in this instance apply the Penetrations. The subject most often used during meditation is the breath, but you can choose to focus on anything. Some people use the abdomen or lower diaphragm. I am fond of using my chest and the bellows-like effect each breath has. I have also used my heart, feeling its rhythm and beating. As I relax and calm down, my awareness is drawn to the delicate and sensitive rhythms of the heart action. The mind becomes unwavering and is fully concentrated.

As you breathe the **Initial Contact** can either be the lungs drawing in the breath or feeling the air as it enters through the nostrils. **Sustained Contact** is the air filling our lungs or passing through the nostrils. **Interest** is that pause between the in and out breath when for an instance the breath is filled. **Joy** is in the knowing and awareness that we are breathing. **One-pointedness** is our attention receptive and absorbed in the present moment of the breath and the whole breathing cycle.

Try also applying the Awareness Penetrations practice to any thought you might have during meditation. Feel as the thought first comes to mind as an **Initial Contact. Sustained Contact** is the thought continuing and becoming stronger or clearer in your mind. **Interest** is the thought being identified. **Joy** is when you know you are fully within the thought preoccupying your mind. **One-pointedness** is the choice of continuing and

developing the thought or to dismiss and release it. You can rest with your mind quieted down.

The Awareness Penetrations practice can also be applied to our daily activities. You might be sweeping the kitchen. **Initial Contact** is picking up the broom and holding it in your hands, **Sustained Contact** is positioning yourself to sweep, **Interest** is as we begin to sweep, **Joy** is known as we connect with the sweeping motion, and **One-pointedness** is our carrying out the chore with a clear mind and full awareness of what we are doing. This is knowing and having a simple but profound happiness.

"Wonderful it is to train the mind so swiftly moving, seizing whatever it wants. Good is it to have a well-trained mind, for a well-trained mind brings happiness." DH 35.

Life Practice

Our personalities have a disposition to certain distractions more than others. This has been our conditioning as we are prone to falling back on past experiences and projecting them on the present.

Starting with the boredom factor and how we become disconnected, observe yourself and under what conditions your Monkey Mind springs up. Stressed or anxious, does the Whining Mind get the better of you? Do responsibilities and options confuse you, the Quicksand Mind coming out? Does your Black Cloud Mind make situations more difficult than they truly are? Identifying these mental states is crucial to understanding and overcoming the distractions.

There are positive ways to counter the distractions. Asking the 'right question' is helpful. What am I doing right here and now? Am I bothered, fearful, or confused? Why am I acting this way and thinking these thoughts and where are they leading me? What is my motivation? Take responsibility for what you are thinking and doing. Don't allow habits and impulses to get the better of you.

Observe how you 'makeover' a situation or person, discriminating through our limited experiences and understanding. Try from the outset of a situation to clearly be aware of your experience. We have a choice, between the distraction of the past and having awareness of the present moment.

If you are walking, be in the awareness of walking and the muscle coordinated movements through your legs. You don't have to add more or embellish the moment. At work, driving, doing chores or alone, be in the awareness of those moments. Don't let your mind wander. Realize that you have been bored, and stop the distraction from being taken over by the out of control Monkey Mind.

Our understanding slowly comes from knowing and awareness. You can feel and know the influences of the distraction and wait for a more opportune time to make a decision or before speaking to someone. Cultivate patience. Multi-tasking may be necessary at your job or business, but it is counter productive in our spiritual practice.

If you have a long standing problem with a certain distraction, make the extra effort to concentrate and be aware of your body/thought dialogue. Feel the 'real' expression of the distraction in the narrowing of your attention and in your body tension. Feel any resistance you may be having towards certain situations or people. When we are distracted our minds narrow and thoughts become compressed. This is the opposite of awareness and concentration. Remember the Everyday Breath is stress related and disconnected. The Known Breath is having awareness and truly knowing what is happening to you in the present moment. We understand and know better. The Monkey Mind is an old standby option.

Take note as you go from boredom and distractions to refocusing with awareness. This is like being a diver coming up from a great depth; a vague, murky light shows above. Aware, you surface through the distractions and are experiencing the present moment.

The Monkey Mind has been tamed. Concentration, understanding and awareness now bring us to Wise Action.

Chapter Five

THE ACTION OF OUR LIVES—
Virtue, Wise Actions and Karma



The Buddha spoke to his son, Rahula, in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrels' Sanctuary.

"What do you think, Rahula? What is the purpose of a mirror?"

"For the purpose of reflection, sir."

"In the same way, Rahula, bodily acts, verbal acts, and mental acts should be done with repeated reflection.

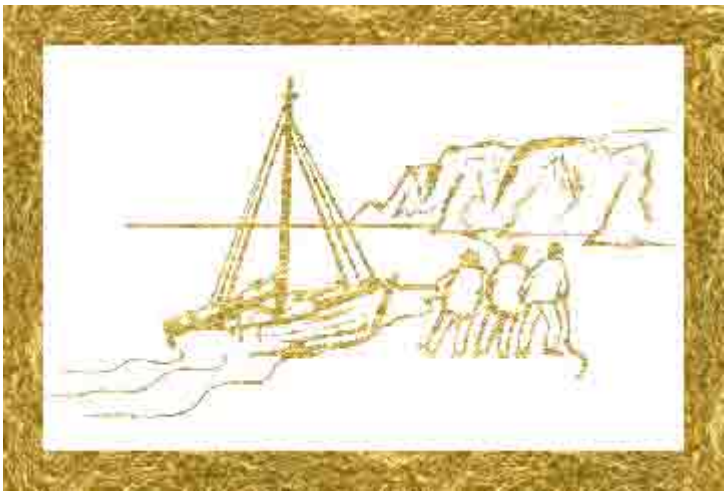
"Whenever you want to do a bodily act…a verbal act…or a mental act…you should reflect upon that same action thus: 'Would this action that I wish to do lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both?...But when you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I wish to do with the body, speech or mind…is a wholesome action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,' then you may do such an action with the body, speech or mind.

"Whenever you are doing a bodily act…a verbal act…or a mental act… you should reflect upon that same action thus: 'Does this action that I do lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both?...But when you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I do with body, speech or mind…is a wholesome action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,' then you may continue in such action with the body, speech, or mind.

"Also, Rahula, after you have done a bodily action…a verbal action…or a mental action… you should reflect upon that same action thus: 'Does this action that I have done does not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both?...But when you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I have done with body, speech or mind…is a wholesome action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,' then you may abide happy and glad, training day and night in wholesome states.

"Therefore, Rahula, you should train yourself: 'I will purify my bodily acts through repeated reflection. I will purify my verbal acts through repeated reflection. I will purify my mental acts through repeated reflection.' That is how you should train yourself." MN 61.

The Action of Our Lives



As children, many of us learn to ride a bike using training wheels or have seen other youngsters using them. Until we finally have the balance, the strength and agility to

ride on our own, the training wheels serve a purpose. As with anything in life, there are levels and degrees of experience, skill, attainment, and maturity to be learned, honed and applied. If you were to become a plumber, electrician, chef, nurse, doctor, or lawyer, you would spend some time, often years studying and practicing, getting certified and licensed, passing exams, or working your way up from apprentice to journeyman. The same applies with our spiritual practice. There are stages of discovery, intuition and awareness to progress through. As you have slowly come to realize and know first hand for yourselves, this spiritual journey is about awareness and the direct experience of our actions, leading to awareness of all our actions of body, speech and thoughts.

In some respects it is easier just to go ahead with our habitual and impulsive ways. We can shrug, look the other way and go from one problem and upset to the next. But it takes awareness and caring to step out from the overwhelming charge of our habit energies. Wise Action is a commitment to improving and living a less suffering life.

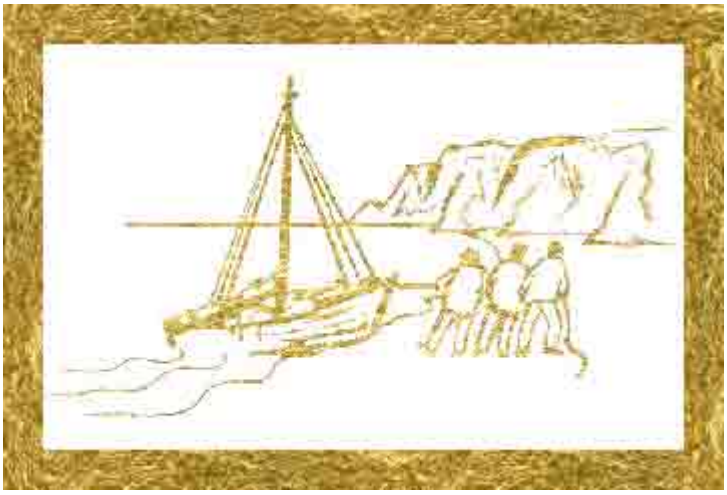
While the Five Wise Actions predate the Buddha and were already in practice in India, through Buddhism they have taken on a unique perspective and application. Life which we live and value, articles which we all possess, sexuality from which we are born, speech through which we communicate, and drugs or alcohol which can be used beneficially, the Five Wise Actions are a continuation of our deepening awareness and appreciation of our lives as well as the choices and options we have. As the Buddha emphasized in the opening quote of this chapter, we reflect on the actions of our lives—body, speech and thoughts.

The late John Lennon wrote a song called ‘Instant Karma’ and how there is no escaping what we have done. Karma literally means action—action as in motion, movement or acted out—a cause and effect and consequence. When we refer to others and ourselves, karma is the motive behind our action and the direction our decisions take us. The Buddha saw that everything in the universe and our lives is a result of action. Not to go into it too deeply here, because karma is a complex and profound experience, the easiest and best way to be introduced and come to terms with karma is through the everyday experiences of our lives and the application of the Five Wise Actions. More than a guideline or way of conduct, the Five Wise Actions have us reflect on how our lives are played out and how we can better live our lives. Yes, as

John Lennon sang, “instant karma is going to get you.” We live experiencing the actions of our lives.

The Five Wise Actions

The Wise Action of Kindness and Understanding (not to harm or injure)



Reverence for all life is the understanding that our personal actions can be an offering of kindness and goodwill in every moment, situation and encounter. We are motivated not to harm or hurt, but to share and live in non-violent cooperation and solutions. The Wise Action of kindness is a practical way of realizing the role and importance of karma in our daily lives—our action as constructive and helpful or our action as destructive and a problem. There can be disagreements, murder and war or tolerance, communication and friendship.

Prior to becoming a monk while at my last job, there was a misunderstanding with a fellow employee who had expectations about our positions. For two weeks straight my co-worker went out of her way to pick a fight and harass me. Not once did I give in to her exchanges. I wasn’t going to perpetuate a nasty volley of arguments. I chose not to feed the karma or action of animosity. Not countering her attacks there they would end. I smiled, nodded my head and patiently listened to her. As I wasn’t upset or intimidated, my co-worker became more upset and her anger vented back on her as she was even more disturbed, out of control and a victim of her own rage. I saw how she was harming herself. By this time I was a more stable practitioner and able to handle the situation. Some five years earlier in an almost identical situation and only a beginner in my spiritual practice, I exploded into a rage with a co-worker of that time. From my more recent encounter, I understood anger as having its beginning in indignation and pride and was able to direct and wisely stop any animosity on my part. The other person is allowed to have their say and to be in disagreement with me.

Even monastics are not immune to disagreements. One younger monk was very adamant. I pointed out how anger was getting the better of him. He wouldn't listen. Far from being perfect, at least I didn't respond with anger. There is no reason why we have to be angry or abrupt in our exchanges.

When you read the Buddhist discourses, hostile and aggressive people repeatedly confronted the Buddha. "It is wonderful…it is marvelous how when [the Buddha] is spoken to offensively again and again, assailed by discourteous courses of speech, the color of his face clears, as is to be expected by one who is accomplished and fully enlightened." MN 36.

When we don't get our way, the other person becomes the enemy and a threat. With Wise Action, here first we note and catch how harmful reactions enter our consciousness. Most of our disagreements and arguments are misunderstandings blown out of proportion. We sense ourselves getting ruffled. Feel how your body tenses, your pulse and blood pressure increase and hormones race. In an instant we are out of control, exchanging words, dagger-like stares, finger pointing, making ultimatums and then turning our backs on one another. If we saw one of our own children acting in this way we would sit them down and have a long talk with them. But as adults we think we are above reproach.

The Wise Action of not harming extends not only to humans but to all beings and creatures. If there is a trail of ants coming into your house, try cleaning better and not leaving anything out or at least using non-toxic repellents that keep most bugs away (poisoning the environment also affects us). Our every motive needs to be searched and exposed for hatred and cruelty. While working the garden at a temple, my fellow brothers and I collected the snails in a bucket then took them to a back field to enjoy wider pastures. The garden was virtually made snail and slug free. The intent isn't only to not harm, but to live in peace with our neighbors, the four legged and scaly ones, too. The world belongs to everyone.

The Wise Action of Generosity and Sharing (not to steal or take what isn't ours)

Who hasn't had such 'innocent' or 'trivial' lapses such as walking away with paper clips, pens and restaurant packets of sugar or making long distance phone calls at work? But we know better than to take what isn't ours.

There is also a deeper recognition as we have the generosity to share and offer whatever we can. This is having awareness of the action of our lives. Should you see a homeless person asking for money, do you pass them by without at the very least greeting them and wishing them well? "What the miser fears, that keeps him from giving, is the very danger that comes when he doesn't give." SN 1, 32.

The motives behind our giving and sharing are important, too. Do we give with our reputation in mind and the attention it draws on us, or with the hope of coming away with a favor? This is hardly being generous. "If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of miserliness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift. But because beings do not know, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they eat without having given. The stain of miserliness overcomes their minds." IT 26.

Having a broader understanding, there can be exploitation by corporations, corrupt politicians and government officials, or there can be charities, establishing centers for the underprivileged, and serving the public at large. The world isn't only selfish. Each of us can be an influence.

The Wise Action of Caring (sexual responsibility, offering compassion)
Rather than indulging or being led astray by our every sexual urge, there is the awareness that caring rather than passion is available as an expression. We can care deeply while not having to feel that we have to possess, control or crave the other person. Sexual misconduct harms us by putting us into compromising positions, ruins individuals and families as well as destroying the lives and happiness of innocent children. Many people have been hurt by the trauma of irresponsible sex, going on to inflict that same trauma in the name of 'love' onto others. I know of one incident where unknown to the wife, the husband was a pedophile. He was discovered and put in jail. Shortly afterwards her teenage son died in an accident and the woman's home life was completely destroyed. This is the repercussion of warped sexuality. In a well-documented case of the mid 1990's, a female schoolteacher went on to have sex with a male student and then have a child from this encounter. The woman was sentenced to prison. She brought catastrophe to herself and to the family of the young man. Impulsive sexual

escapades can have far reaching consequences. Visiting one of my old college professors after my graduation, he sadly told me the story of his divorce from his wife of many years after he had a brief affair with a college girl. He was deeply remorseful for having the fling and considered the affair the worst mistake of his life. He had lost his wife and the respect of his older daughters. He looked miserable and alone. Such are the consequences of disturbed sexual desires.

Sex is on TV, in the movies and in scandalous headlines from the highest government offices (Clinton/Lewinsky in 1998 is only one instance of a fall from grace). The suggestiveness and allure of sex and sensuality is everywhere in magazines and advertisement campaigns. Where does all this lead us? Our first impulse is to lust and desire. We don't talk or communicate, but sneak off to the bedroom or run off to hotels for a rendezvous. Easily excited and enticed, our selfish preoccupation with sex limits our true potential. This isn't about being a prude or censoring things, but we each should realize and assume responsibility for what we are doing, and where our desires are leading us.

The Wise Action of Truthfulness (not to lie but to use honest and kind speech)

Compared to many countries, here in the West we are fortunate to have freedom of speech and believe it is our right to say whatever we think and feel. But words that injure, cause misunderstanding, and escalate tension are misusing our right to speech. If you see something that you don't necessarily agree with, to come out and criticize it is like poking someone with a stick. What we take to be right for us isn't necessarily right for someone else. Instead of name calling at the work place, finger pointing at home or blaming a partner or friend, Wise Speech has us examining ourselves rather than running off at the mouth.

Speaking unkindly puts us in a state of aggression. Lying and straying from the truth keeps us restless and filled with doubt as we rush about to cover up and fabricate another lie. Lying or wrong speech splinters our mind into many disordered directions. Even white lies are misleading. We victimize ourselves by not being able to live and deal with the truth and things as they are. "The person who lies…there is no evil he might not do." IT 25.

Even gentle, chiding humor comes under the heading of thoughtless speech. We shouldn't be too serious that we can't have a laugh or share in a light moment, but when humor goes on to chide, exaggerate, maim or single out someone for foibles that we all have, then our speech has taken on a wounding and aggressive nature. Our words should be treasured and measured to fit the situation and be directed to the level of understanding of the other person.

Gossip relays something we don't have direct experience about. People are hurt by our spreading exaggerated or false reports. Gossip is always ugly, brings pain and even destroys people, families and reputations. You can see just how miserable the lives of politicians and movie stars are. Look back at the Watergate scandal of the early 1970's for rumor mill and dishonest tactics used by the Republican re-election committee (politics in general, the drive for power and control, has thrived on character assassination.).

Tabloid magazines lining the supermarket checkout area are a glaring example of the titillating and morbid 'thrill' that over comes us with gossip. It is sad that we 'enjoy' the suffering and unfortunate problems of others. The Buddha instructs, "Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter: This is called right speech." SN 150, 8.

Having awareness, we realize how our speech starts and forms as a thought. ("Mind is the forerunner of all states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they." DH 1.) But because of our careless and self justified natures we let fly out from our mouths the first thing that comes to mind. Our spoken words mirror our Monkey Minds of scattered concentration, fear based bias, discrimination and confusion. Have the patience to listen to others. Having wise speech also includes 'noble silence.' If we don't have anything worthwhile to share or communicate, there is our calm and peaceful presence to share. Listening is an important part of speech and communication.

Our conversations have consequences and can take us from arguments and confrontations to trust, sharing and open communication. A simple, "I don't know" is often the best answer. "A statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken…It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of goodwill." AN 5, 198.

The Wise Action of Moderation (to be responsible for our drugs or alcohol use)

The consequences of drugs and alcohol are obvious as our body, speech and thoughts are impaired—unable to drive, stumbling along, slurred speech, body chemistry a wreck, a careless attitude. We have no sense of judgment or excess. The rush of a drug is never worth the effects of being out of control and the time it takes to recover. Drug addiction, wild parties and lost, drunken weekends are one option, but there can also be the joy of living our lives naturally, without needing to repress, escape or live in denial through drugs. This is a sane and sensible 'high.' Carelessness through drugs or alcohol harms friends and family.

But what do we do if we are 'unwise' or neglectful? Is it the end of the world? Are we condemned? Not at all. We learn from our being less than perfect. We are apprentices on the Path to Peace. We tried something and it may not have worked or it simply wasn't to our benefit. In the Conch Trumpet Discourse (SN 152, 8) the Buddha explains how to deal with our unwise actions.

"What do you think…If a man is one who steals...indulges in illicit sex...tells lies, then taking into consideration time spent doing and not doing, whether by day or by night, which time is more: the time he spends telling lies or the time he spends not telling lies?... Taking into consideration time spent doing and not doing, whether by day or by night, then the time he spends telling lies is less, and the time he spends not telling lies is certainly more.

"There are living beings that I have killed, to a greater or lesser extent. That was not right. That was not good. But if I become remorseful for that reason, that evil deed of mine will not be undone.' So, reflecting thus, he abandons right then [and there] the taking of life, and in the future refrains from taking life. This is how there comes to be the abandoning of that evil deed. This is how there comes to be the transcending of that evil deed.

"There are lies that I have told, to a greater or lesser extent. That was not right. That was not good. But if I become remorseful for that reason, that evil deed of mine will not be undone.' So, reflecting thus, he abandons right then [and there] the telling of lies, and in the future refrains from

telling lies. This is how there comes to be the abandoning of that evil deed. This is how there comes to be the transcending of that evil deed.

"Having abandoned the taking of life, he refrains from taking life. Having abandoned stealing, he refrains from stealing. Having abandoned illicit sex, he refrains from illicit sex. Having abandoned lies, he refrains from lies. Having abandoned divisive speech, he refrains from divisive speech. Having abandoned harsh speech, he refrains from harsh speech. Having abandoned idle chatter, he refrains from idle chatter. Having abandoned covetousness, he becomes uncovetous. Having abandoned ill will & anger, he becomes one with a mind of no ill will. Having abandoned wrong views, he becomes one who has right views.

"…Thus devoid of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unconfused, alert, mindful…in the same way, when the awareness-release…is thus developed, thus pursued, any deed done to a limited extent no longer remains there, no longer stays there."

There isn't a one of you who has come this far on the Path to Peace who will ever again return to being the tormented, struggling persons you were before. You have awakened to go against the habit-filled stream current. There has been a transformation—you are aware. The choices and directions we take are our own doing. Karma is a sobering wake up call; not negative, tragic or a verdict, but how we choose to direct and live our lives.

On one level there is only the eternal here and now present moment, but having a deeper understanding there is also action, how it is sparked and where our action leads us. The present comes alive from the past; tomorrow has begun for us now.

Life Practice

What do I do with bugs entering the house? Is it all right to eat meat and be a Buddhist? What am I supposed to do if I am attacked by someone? If I find something, can I take it home with me or is that considered stealing? It is good to ask questions and explore Wise Action.

Is it necessary to panic if we discover a trail of ants making their way into the house? There is the action to clean better or try spraying around the perimeter of the house with pepper spray or WD40 oil. This isn't toxic. The

ants won't cross the sprayed line. For slugs and snails, set out special, non-lethal powders (lemon and orange peals work very well because of their acidity). Visiting Third World countries, I would catch a cockroach in my room in a plastic cup and release it outside. If mice are entering your pantry and eating your foodstuffs, it is a 'wise action' to place the food in plastic containers. Get 'traps with a heart' which capture the mice alive and you can release them later in a field. The mice are only trying to survive. Allow yourself to share in this world occupied with its many creatures and beings. Tight fitting screens and better insulation around doors can keep away unwanted guests. Place some food outside to draw the bugs or ants. You can pick snails out from your garden and transplant them elsewhere. All this requires a little extra effort but the final results all lead to our peace rather than stress and conflict.

What if you are attacked? Try talking and reason, running away, and if you are forced to defend yourself, can you disarm the person? It isn't our intention to harm or kill. If an unfortunate result should come about, it was never our motive to hurt anyone. Sharon Salzberg, the Dharma teacher, managed to free herself from an attacker while in India. She went to her teacher to discuss what should be done in an extreme case. The teacher said to hit the assailant compassionately over the head with an umbrella! I remember watching John Lennon on TV while I was a teenager. He was asked as a man of peace how he would handle someone attacking him. He mentioned that he would run away rather than fight. Unfortunately, Lennon was later murdered by a deranged fan. But Lennon always stood by his peaceful principles.

Regardless if you are a meat eater you can nevertheless practice the awareness revealed through Buddhist insight. There are no conditions or prerequisites for living a life of Wise Actions. But for variety, try substituting non-meat dishes a few times a week in place of fish or meat. Get to know herbs and spices, tofu, beans and legumes. Your palette will find these other offerings every bit as tasty and filling as well as your cholesterol level and blood pressure decreasing. Eating dairy products is fine. The animals aren't harmed in this case and we are grateful to be sharing nutrition with them. But realize the suffering brought to an animal that is slaughtered. This is sobering.

Should you find a lost item make an attempt to find the rightful owner first. There is nothing wrong with keeping something you may find, but also

remember to be generous and grateful. There are so many others with less means. Reflect on how blessed you really are, especially with having good friends, family and your spiritually aware life.

Value your life and respect your physical and mental health. Know where the action of your indulgence is taking you. It might seem that recreational use of drugs is inconsequential, but how much better would you be without them? Hate, fear, rejection and low self-esteem are covered up by our self-destructive tendencies. It is one thing for a terminally ill patient to use medication, but it is another to unnecessarily dull our body, speech and thoughts through drug abuse.

What about our society in general—obese, fast-food consuming, drug indulgent, alcohol consuming, glued to violent and sexual flashing screen images—where are we headed as a people and a planet? Anything we over indulge in and abuse, whether it be food or videos, is harmful.

As you begin to include the Wise Actions to your life, focus on one at a time as a 'theme for the week.' One week stress being kind and not harming. Another week be gracious with your speech and truly listen to others. But we shouldn't be self righteous with a superior-than-thou attitude that puts others off. Wise Action is our own realization and happiness, not a criticism of others. We can't change or expect other people to be anything other than what they are nor should we be upset and at odds with situations that are less than 'perfect.'

The Five Wise Actions help guide us away from conflict, struggle and stress towards happiness. This is the real life aspiration of a spiritual practice—to live in awareness and to be happy. As we apply the Wise Actions to our life and relationships, the motivation behind the action of our lives becomes clear. Trouble sleeping; anxious, nervous and impatient; quick tempered and vengeful; indecisive and on edge; confused and frightened, lustful and wandering concentration, our unaware actions have a way of haunting and gnawing at us. Wise Action promotes confidence, understanding and caring.

Often we think of people like the Buddha, Jesus, Florence Nightingale, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa, The Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela as 'super people.' Their acts of generosity, acceptance and compassion have deeply touched and inspired us all. And yet these 'super

people' have also known doubt, suffered and cried in their own lives. But despite their uncertainties, they have always transcended their suffering and thought of benefiting others. Each of us has many virtues, strengths and qualities. We help friends and strangers, we do favors, give money, share and are generous. And though you may not believe it, you too, have been a 'super person' for someone at some time—caring, generous and compassionate.

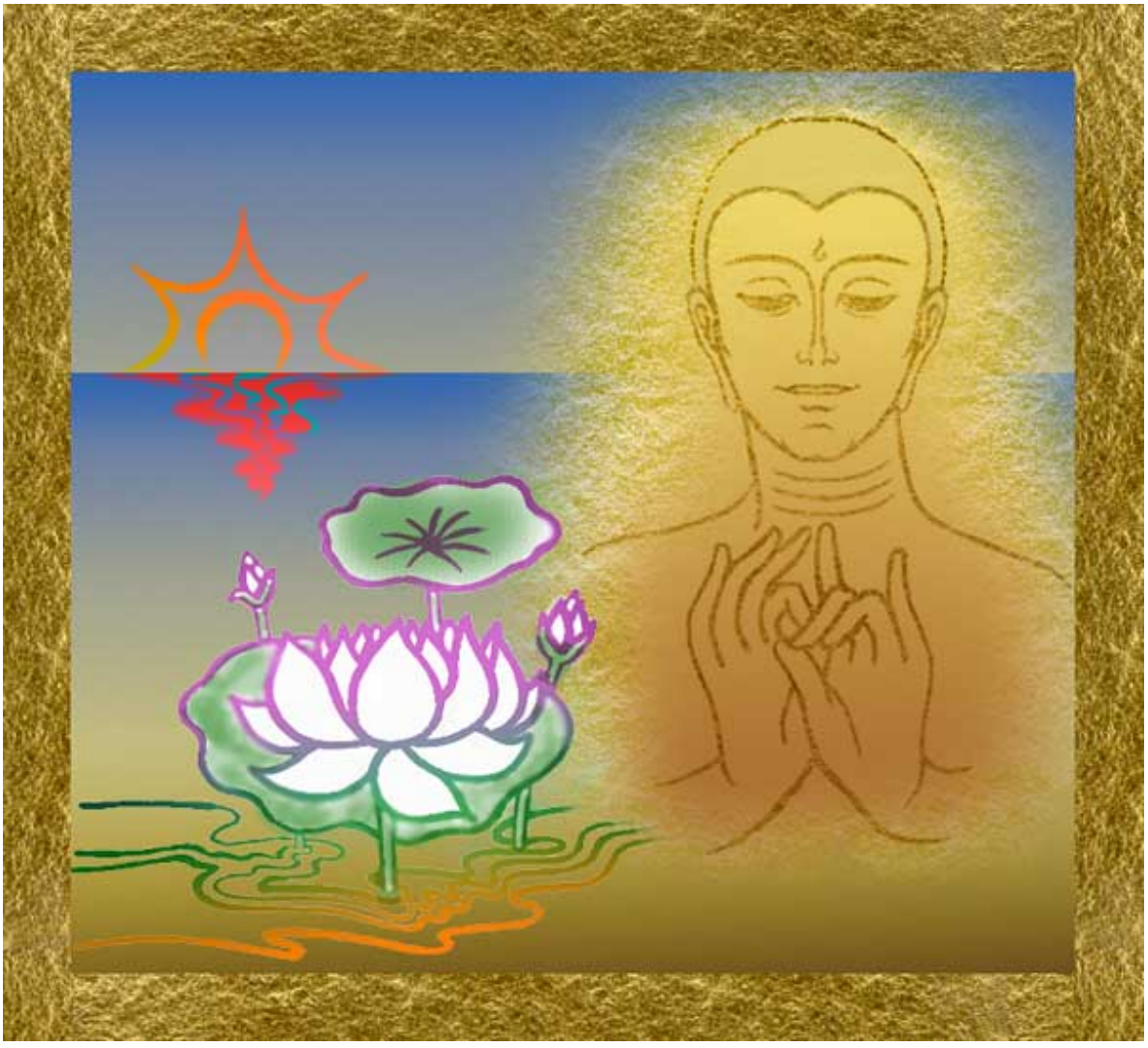
Ahead around the bend waiting to greet us, the Buddha sits in the shade under a tree.

Part Two

THE DHARMA

Chapter Six

THE DHARMA AND THE BUDDHA—
The Truth and The Wisdom



"The gift of Dharma triumphs over all other gifts;
The taste of Dharma triumphs over all other tastes;
The happiness of Dharma triumphs over all other pleasures..." DH 354.
"So give ear, for the immortal has been discovered and I instruct, I teach the Dharma." VN 4.9

"Just as a capable physician might instantly cure a patient who is in pain and seriously ill; so also, whatever one hears of the Buddha's Dharma, be it discourses, mixed prose, explanations or marvelous statements—one's sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair will vanish…all one's plight, fatigue and the feverish burning of the heart are allayed." AN

The Buddha and Us



Coming down from the mountainside on to the plane, the path widens to a reddish-brown worn smooth surface. Many spiritual travelers have passed this way. There is a sense of safety and certainty now in knowing the way has cleared for us. The sun shines bright and warm on the flat land.

The path bends to the right. Ahead there is a clearing with a grouping of trees. Looking closer, there is a figure sitting in the shadows. We approach slowly. A man dressed in a saffron robe, his head shaved, sits meditating. His back is straight, eyes closed, hands cupped before him, the left hand under the right. A wooden bowl is set behind him off to the side. We have seen people meditating before but this man is different. There is a deep calm and peace about him. We feel as though we are interrupting a private moment.

Stepping into the circle of shaded trees, we now clearly see the man. A thin cotton robe is wrapped around his body. He has a tan, clean complexion with smooth features, full lips, long thin nose turning downward, long eyelashes and thick-tufted dark eyebrows. With his head shaved, his ears seem large. The shape of his head is smooth. His hands have long, delicate fingers. His legs are crossed over in the full lotus sitting position. Callous show on the underside of his feet from walking barefoot. He breathes easily, the breath generated in his lower diaphragm.

Slowly his eyes open; large gleaming brown eyes with a polished copper-like tinge around the pupils. He stares at the ground in front of him,

seeming to be looking far away. The eyes move up to take us into their gaze then our eyes meet. His stare is deep and penetrating, seeing and knowing everything about us at a glance. Our eyes pull away from his strong stare then meet again. In that moment we missed how his eyes glinted to become welcoming. There is a trace of a gentle smile as his lips have stretched out and turned up at the corners. With a slight nod of his head he invites us to sit down across from him. We give a nervous bow, joining our hands together in respect, then as we sit down we give another nervous bow. Here we are sitting before the Buddha. He gives a broader, full-welcoming smile. We feel at ease and smile back. His eyes glance down at the ground before looking back up at us. He is helping us to settle down. We sigh a deep breath and let the tension and nervousness pass, relaxing in his presence.

He speaks up breaking the silence. His voice is calm as he talks in a kind but sincere tone.

"Even if one should seize the hem of my robe and walk behind me, if he is covetous in his desires, fierce in his longings, malevolent of heart, with corrupt mind, careless and unrestrained, he is far from me. Because he does not see the Dharma, and not seeing the Dharma, he does not see me (AN 1)…he is near to me and I am near to him because he sees the Dharma, and seeing the Dharma, he sees me…But thoroughly understanding Dharma and freed from longing through insight, the wise one, rid of all desire, is calm as a pool unstirred by the wind. How close is that peaceful one to one at peace, that cool one to one cooled, that content one to one content! (IT 91). Just as the sun and the moon clear all, the doctrine and rules proclaimed by the Perfect Buddha shine before all the world and not in secret…With regard to the Truth, the [Buddha] has nothing like the closed fist of a teacher." (DN 2, 100).

The Buddha leans forward and picks out some dust with the tip of his fingernail. "What do you think? Which is greater: the little bit of dust I have picked up with the tip of my fingernail, or the great earth?"

"The great earth is far greater," we answer.

"…That's how great the benefit is of breaking through to the Dharma. That's how great the benefit is of obtaining the Dharma eye. (SN 13, 1).

"Seeing misery in philosophical views, without adopting any of them, searching for truth I discovered 'inward peace.'

"Not by any philosophical opinion, not by tradition, not by knowledge, not by virtue and holy works can anyone say that purity exists…An accomplished person does not by a philosophical view or by thinking become arrogant, for he is not of that sort; not by holy works, nor by tradition is he led, he is not led into any of the resting places of the mind…But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world annoying people. (SN)

"Friend, the essentials of the holy life do not consist in the profits of gain, honor, and good name…but the sure heart's release, friend—that, friend, is the meaning, that is the essence, that is the goal of living the holy life. (MN)

Referring to our three fold practice of meditation, compassion and understanding, the Buddha explains, "Such is virtue, such is concentration, such is understanding; concentration fortified with virtue brings great benefits and great fruit; understanding fortified with concentration brings great benefits and great fruits; the heart fortified with understanding becomes completely liberated…(DN 16). How should one make the Dharma one's own island or refuge? Through the cultivation of mindfulness or awareness of the body, sensations, mind and mind-objects." (DN 2, 100).

"Others will be cruel…others will kill living beings…others will take what is not given…others will engage in inappropriate sexuality…others will speak falsehoods…others will speak maliciously…others will gossip…others will be envious…others will be avaricious…others will be fraudulent…others will be arrogant…others will be unmindful…others will lack wisdom; we shall cultivate wisdom. Thus, one should incline the mind." (MN)

We watch the Buddha. He looks down at the ground. Though sitting directly before us, he is detached, an easy breathed rhythm flowing through him. No trace of a personality shows in him. He is like no other person we have met or known. Our breath and breathing have stilled to be sitting before him. A breeze rustles through the treetops; birds' chirping echoes; two squirrels run across a limb, but we have lost all sense of time.

The world, our bodies and busy minds have vanished. Here is the Buddha. For the first time we have witnessed true contentment and absolute peace in the presence of this Great Being, and know it as a potential within ourselves.

As I now make my own way along the Path to Peace, I find myself continually amazed at the purity, wisdom and boundless compassion shared by the Buddha. Shown and expressed in many situations, he offered insight to our suffering humanity. His understanding, scope of insight and clarity of wisdom is the most valuable realization offered by anyone. Part psychology, part natural science, and all compassionately oriented, our awakening to the Dharma is a personal experience of liberation.

No easy feat, Siddhartha Gotama's profound breakthrough to experience and realize the Dharma, the true nature of life, came after six years of intense effort and practice which nearly cost him his life. Finally, he penetrated reality and the liberating way to freedom. As the 'Great Teacher and Guide of the World,' the Buddha showed the way to awakening that is possible for all of us to realize. Each of us has a great potential to awaken; to experience and understand for ourselves the Dharma. Our 'ignorance' and carelessness of not knowing or clearly understanding reality, being distracted and caught up by our habits, keeps us tied to problems and stress. We are all capable of wisdom.

A Buddha has three defining qualities: perfect purity, profound wisdom and great compassion.

Siddhartha Gotama as the Buddha-to-be devoted himself to transforming and purifying himself of all corrupt thoughts, condemning speech and harmful actions rooted in desire, hatred and confusion. By living with pure intention and deeply experiencing the cycles of life that are the Dharma, Siddhartha overcame his passions and weaknesses.

As the 'Knower of the World,' he profoundly realized the true nature of life (impermanence, the friction and suffering from impermanence and its non-self nature). He discerns the minds and motives of others, their abilities and level of understanding, sharing insight in a practical and straightforward way. Turning each person to have personal awareness and direct experience of the Dharma, he skillfully revealed life and the way out from suffering.

With the third noble characteristic of Great Compassion, the Buddha shared his insights on the Dharma for forty-five years. Having passed through similar problems and hardships, the wisdom of the Buddha is motivated by the 'Immeasurables' of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

"There will be some with less dust on their eyes," (MN) the Buddha remarked about the potential of others. Never discouraged, he showed patience and an intuitive skillful means to communicate the Dharma with his audience. Traveling barefoot over the Northern Indian countryside, the Buddha continued his compassionate mission of helping others 'awaken' until his Great Passing at age 80. Surviving him is the oldest practicing order of monks and nuns.

For some years now the Dharma and the Buddha's insights have been making inroads into our high-tech, fast-paced Western culture. While no definite course or tone to Western Buddhism has emerged, given time it will flourish and develop its own character as Buddhism has done throughout the Far East and Asia. Perhaps, the United States being the melting-pot that it is, the best from all the Buddhist traditions will be adopted to form a 'United' or 'One Dharma.' Also, Buddhist temples and monasteries are beginning to spring up and prosper in cities big and small across the U.S. heartland as well as on both coasts. Meditation retreats and Dharma talks are offered by monks and nuns while lay Dharma teachers share their insight. Monastics dressed in Theravada saffron robes, brown or gray Mahayana wardrobe, or in the dark red of the Tibetan lineage, have come to stay in the West as well as inspire others to join their ranks on the Path to Peace.

For myself, I had been meditating for two years before I first met a Buddhist monk. Attending a three-day retreat at a West Coast meditation center, there were two lay Dharma facilitators and a Theravada monk. Here in trend-setting California was this calm monk of English origin, dressed in saffron colored robes, his pale complexion standing out against the darker colored cloth. He sat sitting with his eyes closed, left hand cupped under the right hand.

The retreat took place over a hot weekend, but the monk sat cool, calm, and unbothered. Never had I seen such composure, gentleness and grace. For a long while he didn't open his eyes nor speak, as the lay facilitators began the

retreat. All the while I couldn't keep my eyes off the monk. I was sweating in the stuffy meditation hall. Flies buzzed around and distracted my attention while my knees ached from sitting cross-legged. Other practitioners coughed, rustled about, and made the typical settling down noises that accompany the start of every retreat. But the monk sat as though sitting on a cool cloud, unmoving and concentrated. At one point the sound system shot up loudly and everyone grimaced or covered their ears, but the monk sat unmoved.

On the second day the monk was introduced. His eyes opened, a smile brightened his face. When he looked across at the audience of some 70 practitioners, he wasn't looking in the way that most people would of judging or sizing things up. His head turned slowly from side-to-side, simply reviewing the scene. He had a calm and soothing presence, sharing and instilling his peace over the group. As he spoke, he came across as warm, genuine and witty. From somewhere deep within him, out came this personality. Now he was communicating in the conventional sense of language and gestures, smiles and light-hearted jokes.

In the presence of this pale looking monk, I was seeing the true Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—alive, real, wise and compassionate. Beyond anything I had yet experienced, whatever basic meditation composure I had managed to instill in my life, here alive before me in the presence of this monk was the Buddha Dharma. Sitting surrounded by fellow practitioners, I began to weep and tears streamed down my cheeks. They were in part happy tears and in part awakening tears—happy at what I was seeing and being exposed to the Dharma and also awakening tears to truly know and have a glimmer of direct experience and insight.

Later during a break, I managed to slip the monk a scribbled note reading, "I thought through books and readings that I knew the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. But now seeing you, I have truly come to know the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for the first time."

Here in the west Buddhist insight is fairly new. We practice the best we can with the materials and opportunities available. At this moment the number of Buddhist monks and nuns is growing and their presence will be a strong influence and touch many lives. Such is the power generated and communicated by a well-practiced and compassionate monastic or devoted practitioner. Much later when I became a novice monk, I would come in

contact with other generous and well-practiced monks and nuns. On a few other occasions I would be moved by their powerful presence. I only wished that I had known of the Buddha Dharma much earlier in my life.

Now we are invited to join the Buddha as he guides us on the Path to Peace. Rising to his feet, we are surprised how tall the Buddha is as he stands a full head above us. His frame is thin, showing wrapped under the robe. He turns to pick up the bowl, cradling it with his left hand securing the underside, right hand out over the front face. Inside the bowl is a filter to clear away any bugs or insects out from the water. He starts to walk. We are uncertain what to do. The Buddha pauses. We begin to follow behind him. He walks in an easy flowing step-by-step motion. The legs never rise above knee level. His bare feet gently touch the ground without stirring any dust. We slowly head toward the Western horizon.

The Dharma and Us



With the stilling, quiet and ease from a regular meditation practice; having awareness of the present, our thoughts and actions, and applying Wise Action as well as caring to our lives, we have slowly directed ourselves away from being dominated by our habits. Realizations, experiences and an understanding are beginning to focus. A transformation is taking place. Less rushed and more relaxed, our thoughts and mind activity have settled. We aren't as easily overwhelmed or given to carelessness.

About the Dharma the Buddha said, "Whether [a Buddha] appears or not it remains a fact, an established principle, a natural law that all conditioned things are impermanent, suffering and that everything is non-self. This fact the [Buddha] realizes, understands and when He has realized and understood it, announces, teaches, proclaims, establishes, discloses, analyses, and makes it clear, that all conditioned things are impermanent, suffering and that everything is non-self." AN 1.

The Buddha referred to his practice as ‘the Dharma’ and the ‘Discipline.’ Once realized, the Dharma opens and illuminates our journey of ‘awakening’ and wisdom. The ‘Discipline’ is the many useful tools of practice (meditation, virtue, and understanding as well as precepts and the developed monastic order) which help transform us.

Dharma has the literal meaning of to support, to sustain, or to hold up. But in its broader definition, the Dharma is the true nature of all things and reality; how life, experiences and phenomena come to be and play themselves out. The word dharmas in lower case is used to refer to all life and experiences within the greater Dharma. In our human form we are dharmas, part of the changing elements within the greater Dharma, and so are all other dharmas of suns, planets, plants, animals as well as the greater scope of nature being a dharma. The vast complexity of the universe is influenced by the three aspects of the Dharma—impermanence, the friction and suffering which comes about from impermanence, and the non-self nature of life. Underscoring the Dharma is the fundamental makeup of how all life experience is governed and ruled as a form of checks and balances. Everything within the Dharma has its reason, motives or karma, brought about by impermanence.

We are the Dharma. There isn’t a moment that we aren’t experiencing the changes of life, the suffering or stress from impermanence as well as the non-self nature. As the Buddha noted, “Rather it is in this fathom-long carcass [our bodies] with its perceptions and its mind that I describe the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world.” SN 2, 36.

One of the first things we have come to know and experience is that thoughts come and go, feelings appear and disappear, sensations are felt then fade away. This simple awareness is impermanence, change as the driving force in our lives and a part of everything in the universe. The unsettling of impermanence as a compelling force in our lives leads us to desire after one thing or another in pursuit of security. We become angry or disappointed when a moment changes or isn’t to our liking. Confused as a conscious being, we take all too seriously our every thought and fantasy. We have alienated ourselves from the present moment reality that is the Dharma. We kid ourselves and are in denial that somehow we are exempt and privileged from going through the changes that everything and everyone must experience.

Before beginning our spiritual journey, it would have been impossible as well as untimely to be exposed to the truth of the Dharma. We were living an unsettled and confused life, unable to recognize, understand or experience for ourselves anything but our habit energies and impulsive reactions. It would have been like allowing a child to drive the family car. The Dharma is a truth that isn't shared randomly and scattered about like leaves cart wheeling in the wind, but offered at the right moment to people and practitioners who can understand, appreciate and apply the Dharma's liberating potential. There is always the matter of considering the level of each person through skillful and practical means. The Buddha usually spoke to people about Wise Action, virtue and compassion before revealing the Dharma. Try teaching higher mathematics like trigonometry or calculus to someone who is still having problems with basic arithmetic and see how far you will get. Have a person who has started to learn the violin join the symphony and what kind of results would they achieve? We have now readied ourselves through our consistent practice to experience the Dharma.

As we continue on our spiritual journey, we will explore the many dimensions of the Dharma, and also how our practice naturally deepens through realization and experience as we go from awareness to insight to wisdom.

Experiencing the Dharma—
Everyday Truth and Known Truth



A progress of recognition and penetration, our practice isn't about having a pass or fail grade, but about being aware and stepping out from suffering actions and compromising tendencies to having understanding.

Our breathing exposes two contrasting experiences—the Everyday Breath and the Known Breath.

Through great gulps of anxious Everyday Breathing, we are tense and stressed, at odds with the world. Nothing seems to go right. Everywhere we look trouble and inconveniences crop up while the people we deal with are

strangers or enemies. Confrontations, tempers and hostility make up for our day. Not realizing or accepting the Dharma, a defensive attitude of mine and theirs, right and wrong, fight and flee, emerges as a survival technique to help us cope with the changing experiences of ordinary life. The Everyday is a living nightmare.

With every change, with our every noted experience, there is the awareness of the Known Breath. The present moment then is realizing the Dharma of change in our lives. Without drawing a line and having a nasty exchange or confrontation, change that marks the Dharma also works to our benefit. There are careless and unwise actions, which keep us tied to compromised expectations and tendencies, but there is also the Known Breath of mindful contact. Rather than being locked into and victimized by difficult situations, Wise Action is engaged. Knowing the Dharma is knowing that we have options and choices instead of always going down the same hopeless dead end street of desires, anger and confusion. The simplicity of awareness distinguishes the Known Breath and slowly the Dharma is revealed. From this point on our spiritual journey is distinguished by insight as we leave behind Everyday upset.

The happiness and fulfillment that has come to be my life and will also be yours, is a satisfaction and realization like no other. In challenging situations where my old personality would have raged and fought back, I am now confident and caring. I am soft spoken and patient instead of aggressive and insistent. I never imagined my life being this complete. I am no different than anyone else on the Path to Peace. You, too, will be pleasantly surprised at where the Path to Peace leads you. The classic analogy is of a lotus emerging from the muddy depths of a dark pond to slowly inch its way out to the surface sunlight. We go from ignorance to wisdom.

I have known drug addicts, hypertension patients, alcoholics, repressed and fearful people as well as easily angered persons—each one of them has been transformed through the insight of the Dharma.

Life Practice

People and situations are a challenge. Things happen unexpectedly and we can be caught off guard. But we have deepened our practice and strengthened our awareness. We know the difference between the Everyday

and the Known; the first is common, stressful and problem filled, and the former is aware, realized and understood. The challenge for us throughout the day is to know when our awareness has drifted and to guide ourselves out from continuing in the direction of problems and upsets.

But don't feel you have to be 'perfect.' That would just be returning to Everyday pressures without having any understanding or insight. Take life one moment at a time. Make the present moment your only moment. Everything else is beside the point. Remember, it isn't about being right or wrong but about being aware and knowing where you are in life and where your thoughts, speech and actions are taking you. If you loose your temper, are overwhelmed by fear or doubt, this means you simply weren't aware. At least now you have realized how Everyday carelessness confuses and compromises your life. Awakening after the fact is nevertheless awakening. The next time you will act differently. I knew of one Dharma Teacher who was going to write a letter to someone over a comment he didn't feel was appropriate on his part. He had awareness.

If at some point we do explode in anger, while not solving everything, we can apologize to the other person for our action. Awareness takes us towards remorse and the stirring of compassion. In the end, congratulate yourself and be confident. Slowly you will find yourself more in tune and having deeper understanding of your actions. If you are a person given to road rage you can now wish the person in the other car well, allowing them to move ahead. You have understood where anger would have carried over to ruin your day, changing to a flexible awareness of patient problem solving.

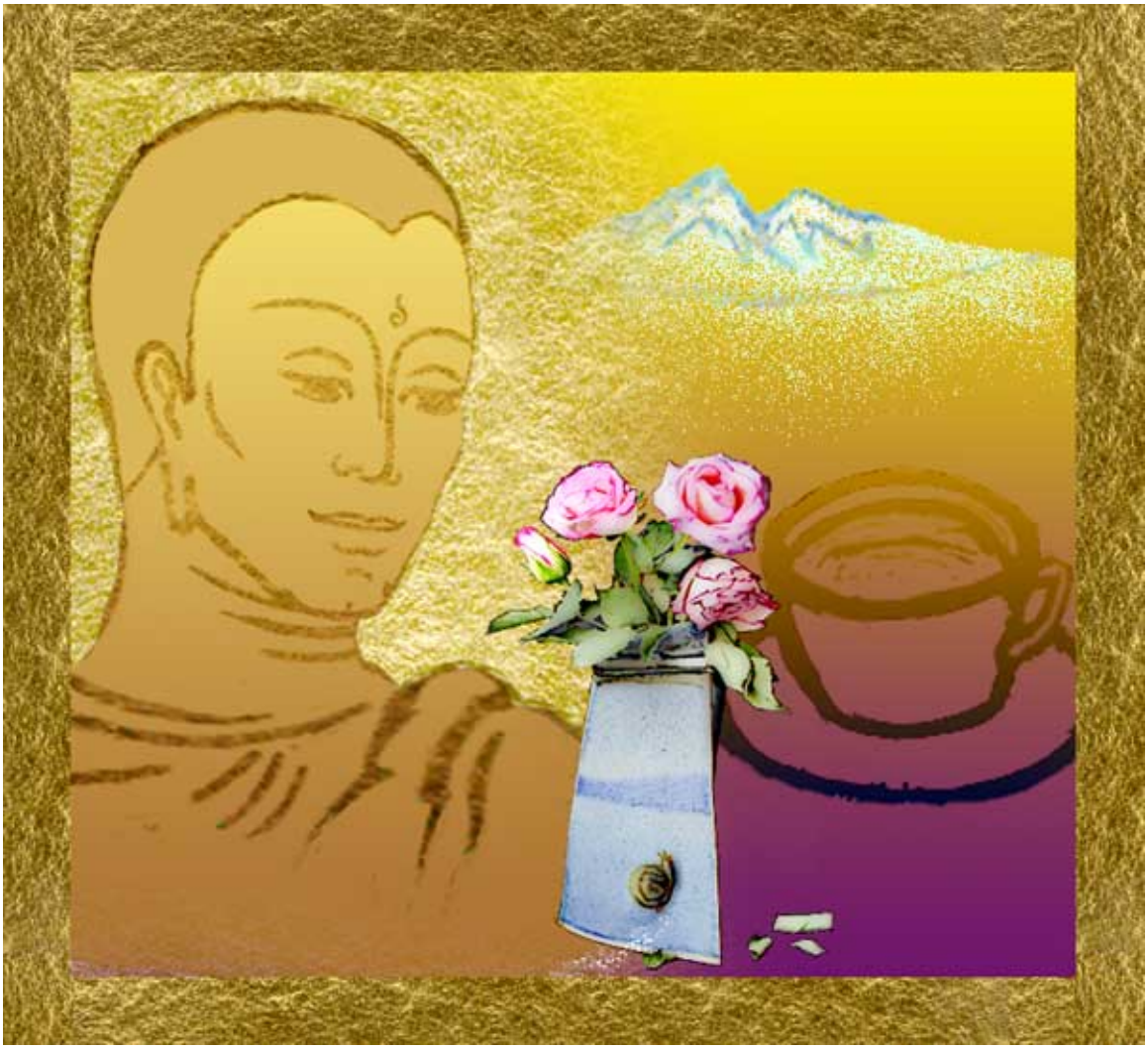
Watch out for automatic pilot! Just as we can put our cars on cruise control, don't let your mindfulness lull. Having an Everyday attitude we argue and are absentminded. Known awareness is a smooth, gentle ride as we see where we are and what is in front of us.

Even with difficult people, the idea is to go beyond our habits and having a tit-for-tat attitude. We see how an aggressive attitude only worsens a situation and leaves ill feeling. Notice how all too quickly we turn into judge and jury. Feel how your mind wanders when bored with the other person and tunes them out. Note the difference when you are involved and caring.

Our awakening is a personal discovery—the truth we experience is the Wisdom of the Dharma.

Chapter Seven

IMPERMANENCE
AND THE SUFFERING FROM IMPERMANENCE—
Energy, Karma, Self



"That impermanence, that suffering, that changeability in the world—that is the misery in the world." AN 258.

"Above, across or back again,
wherever he goes in the world
let him carefully scrutinize
the rise and fall of compounded things." IT 120

Our 'Wandering' Through Impermanence



The Buddha looks directly into our eyes. His copper tinged brown eyes are honest and serious. A long moment passes in silence. Once we are settled, he begins to speak.

"Life in the world is unpredictable and uncertain. Life is difficult, short and fraught with suffering. Being born, one has to die; this is the nature of the world. With old age there is death; this is the way things are." He nods his head slightly. "When fruit is ripe, it may drop early in the morning. In the same way, one who is born may die at any moment. Just as all the pots made by all the potters end in being broken, so it is with the life of all who are born. Neither young nor old, foolish nor wise will escape the trap of death. All move towards death. They are overcome by death. They pass on to another world. A father cannot save his son or a family its members. Look! With relatives watching, with tears and crying, men are carried off one by one, like cattle to the slaughter. So, death and aging are a natural part of the world. Thus, the wise grieve not, seeing the nature of the world." (SN 574-581).

His eyes are open wide. A great truth is being conveyed. "There are these five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained. Which five?
I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging...

I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness...

I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death...

I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me...

I am the owner of my [motivates] actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." (AN 5, 57).

His eyes are piercing as he continues talking. "All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are suffering. All conditioned or unconditioned things are soulless or selfless (DH 277-279)…there is this established condition of the Dharma, this fixed law of Dharma: all conditioned phenomena are impermanent…all conditioned phenomena are suffering…all dharmas are non-self…(AN 3, 134). For one who remains focused on the impermanence of all fabrications, ignorance is abandoned, clear knowing arises." (IT 3, 50-99).

Living in La Paz, Baja California, Mexico prior to making my monastic commitment, I would go in the evenings to the edge of town and watch the sunset over the bay. Usually, I would sit for two hours watching the colorful scene unfold across the Western sky. No two sunsets were ever alike. Some evenings were clear. Others were streaked with a few strata of clouds. One evening the sun would be a large, orange flamed ball and the next evening it would be a soft ruby color. I sat there with the blending elements of earth, sea and sky.

A Mexican friend who knew of my interests asked me, "What is Buddhism? What is it all about?"

Motioning to the blue-green bay, I answered, "We are like that—the earth, the sea and sky. But we have lost contact with all the elements. We are like nature. If you sit and meditate, you'll find a quiet place inside yourself and then see how everything really is."

I only half imagined or had an inkling of what life was about. I was closer to ignorant, but at least I was meditating. The settling of meditation then allowed me to see my many habits and impulses and to slowly see into the true nature of life, the Dharma. No, I wasn't in the least bit wise.

Later, I spent some months at a fishing village which was truly getting back to basics, having no telephone, electricity or running water. The highlight of each month was the full moon appearing over the Eastern horizon. We sat quietly and watched as the moon loomed larger in the sky and streaked a shimmering reflection on the water. Here were conditions and nature at their most elemental.

All around us, marking and influencing every aspect of our lives, is impermanence—change and transformation, an arising and dissolving. Too busy in our frantically paced lives, consumed with our self-important doing, we are oblivious to the obvious. Impermanence dominates our lives and the universe.

What then is impermanence? We all know that it means not lasting or enduring. As fleeting and fickle as our thoughts, our own bodies in the course of just one or two seconds aren't the same as they were the moment before. For the best evidence, look at your family history in your many photo albums—newborns; toddlers; high school senior prom bright smiles; young men and women; middle age spread and balding; gray, wrinkled old people. Many of the people in the photographs have passed on. We go from a nursing baby all the way to a hunched-back senior citizen. Nothing or no one escapes the defining way of the Dharma—impermanence.

The tallest mountains, the sturdiest ant hill, waves pounding a shore, a 2,000 year old redwood tree—all crumble, evaporate, change and erode. The universe itself is expanding (expansion is change as things move and shift about) but perhaps one day to collapse upon itself or continue expanding, but there will always be change. The Buddha didn't invent this. He started simply with his breath, became very still and concentrated, observed himself then looked around at the world. Everything is impermanent—arising, transforming and dissolving.

Insurance companies know all about impermanence. They prey and use impermanence to their advantage. They know people will die. There will be fire loss; hurricane, earthquake and storm damage; airplane, car and workplace accidents. They profit on the deception of permanence and pander to people wanting to have a steady, secure life. The symbol of one insurance company is the Rock of Gibraltar. Even the rock will one day be reduced to dust. Most of us accept change as a part of our lives, but there is something we don't understand or acknowledge—our uneasiness and wrestling with change creates the suffering, stress, unhappiness and dissatisfaction of our lives. This was a keen observation and experience noted by the Buddha—impermanence hurts! Unhappy and unsettled, we are in a Catch-22—the very things we desire and crave slip through our fingers like trying to hold water. The more we go on to try to keep our possessions, are attached to loved ones or a certain way of life, the more we suffer.

Ironically, our very desires are our dilemma. All of life is a striving after and a craving for as it seeks to survive, come out ahead and be satisfied.

Naturally, you ask, why is there impermanence—why are things changing, coming apart? Simply put, we don't live in a perfect world or paradise. Fruit ripens, falls and then goes bad. There is evolution, change, and transformation. Nothing is absolute or guaranteed. Ask the insurance companies. The present moment is alive and dynamic, a moment or two passes before changing and dissolving into the next continuously changing present moment experience, going on to then influence and promote other moments. Sharing the Way of the Dharma, the Buddha pointed to our 'wandering' (*samsara*) through impermanence, victims of our own desires, anger and confusion. As a result of impermanence—we continually are rubbed the wrong way.

On the night of his full awakening and wisdom to Buddhahood, Siddhartha Gotama had three profound insights into impermanent life and how our motivated actions affect our lives. In the first understanding he saw deeply into the role of his own past motivations or karma and how his past actions affected his life. He was never the same person but a transferring of similar, motivated karma energy. He realized how the charge of motivated actions played and lent themselves to certain consequences and results to suffering or a life less inclined to suffer. ***"When the mind was thus concentrated…I directed it to the knowledge of recollecting my past lives…many eons of cosmic contraction and expansion…Thus I remembered my manifold past lives in their modes and details." MN 36.***

Once fully penetrating the role of 'self' motivated action and how it carried over, he had a second penetrating understanding, seeing into the lives of all beings and creatures throughout the universe. They all suffered or not because of the actions brought about by their motives or intentions. "***When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. I saw -- by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human -- beings passing away and re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their karma…I saw beings passing away and re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior and superior, beautiful***

and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their karma." MN 36.

In his third penetration of wisdom bringing him to full Buddhahood came the realization of the Four Noble Truths of 'self' promoted action and the way to liberation. ***"When the mind was thus concentrated…I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations [habit energies of 'self' motivation]. I discerned, as it was actually present, that 'This is suffering...This is the origination of suffering...This is the cessation of suffering... This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering…These are fermentations…This is the origination of fermentations...This is the cessation of fermentations….This is the way leading to the cessation of fermentations.' My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the fermentation of sensuality, released from the fermentation of becoming, released from the fermentation of ignorance [of the Dharma and true nature of life]. With release, there was the knowledge, 'Released.' I discerned that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'" MN 36.***

Life appears to be stable and defined because our awareness isn't keen. Slipping by us is the in between moment of 'transformation' within impermanence. We notice the big events of birth and death, beginning and ending, but as change slows in the present moment we are deceived and think of things as solid, fixed and permanent. As a magician uses tricks and illusions, we are deceived by our slow to recognize senses and think of time, events, and places, as well as the biggest delusion of other people and ourselves, as being individual. But the wrinkles, receding hairline, and expanding waist prove otherwise.

This isn't to dismiss or dehumanize the experiences of our lives, but to understand impermanence. We proceed with caution, awareness and caring on our spiritual journey ("Impermanent are all compounded things. When one perceives this with true insight, then one becomes detached from suffering; this is the path of purification." DH 277). Sitting to meditate, we slow down to make contact with the elemental nature and the impermanent truth that is the Dharma.

The Dharma and impermanence aren't haphazard or random, but have the deeper implication of our motives or karma, a compelling willed energy behind them. We can chart the obvious orbits of the planets, but less certain

and defined are the many influences and conditions that make up our own lives because they have the element of free will behind them. To be detailed in later chapters, not only is there change and transformation or willed action in the present, there is also action of the 'past' that goes on to influence the 'future.' This energy is karma. Karma isn't fate or a celestial passing of judgment, but how the energy of our strong-willed motives directs events, then goes on to promote similar, but not exactly the same, actions.

The Makings of Impermanence



The Four Dynamic Forces— Extension, Cohesion, Temperature and Motion

Science has come very far in explaining the forces of nature, but misses the subtleties behind the transformation within impermanence and the link to direct personal experience. Researchers overlook that they are also a part of their findings and connected to the 'big picture.' Investigating ever deeper, elusive elementary particles have been reduced to such names as 'strange, charm, and neutrinos.' Requiring concrete, without-a-doubt proof of so many precise equations, science has run into a wall where their investigation can't penetrate further. The straightforward wisdom of the East can now fill in the gaps where research, calculations, equipment and experiments no longer can measure or define. While science divides and separates in its analyzing, the Dharma is an intuitive dynamic, leading to awareness and wisdom.

There are Four Dynamic Forces of extension, cohesion, temperature, and motion underlying the action of impermanence and make for the variety of conditions coming together as forms. The Four Forces are the very verbs of change. All material phenomena has in its makeup their energy. The dominating element makes for either a body (earth, physical body or form), fluid (liquid or gas), temperature (heat and combustion or cold), or space (air and motion).

Extension (solid)—the earth, our bodies and anything 'solid' in form are molded by the force of extension. The characteristics of hard and soft,

which are relative, allow for a material body to occupy space, resist pressures as well as prevent other forms from occupying the same space. Our skeletal bones, bodies and organs come about as part of the extension dynamic.

Cohesion (liquid)—this dynamic allows for scattered particles to join as 'bodies' or 'forms.' The elements of extension and cohesion are closely interrelated; when cohesion weakens and stops, extension also breaks down.

Water and all liquids reflect cohesion. Cohesion is the element that 'greases' the wheel of impermanence. When some bodies melt, cohesion dominates as fluid. Our intake of liquids accounts for our bodies being 70% cohesion, keeping everything lubed and working.

Temperature (heat)—heat or cold (cold is also a temperature but of a lower degree) have the power to nourish as a vitalizing energy. Every material body possesses some degree of temperature. Unlike the other three forces, the temperature dynamic has the power to regenerate matter by itself. The friction of impermanence as things arise then dissolving makes for temperatures of heat and cold. We are born warm with active energy then go cold when our physical energy ebbs.

Motion (space/air)—movement is produced from this dynamic. Motion is regarded as the force or the generator for temperature. The air element is produced by motion and the reason that all material particles are in state of vibration, flux, change and action. Motion and heat together account for the energy that stimulates our lives.

But where is the earth element or the water element? Where is the air element and the heat element? Penetrating into the Dharma, the Buddha saw the Four Dynamic Forces and how all life are a combination of many influences and conditions joining together. **The paradox of impermanence is that for there to be 'one' there must always be two or more conditions and influences.** For there to be any 'one' person, animal or plant, other conditions or influences exist, and in turn these conditions and influences have their own conditions. You can't point to a particle of solid, liquid, motion or temperature because they are all products of conditions and a changing universe. The Buddha used the word 'compounded' to refer to the many conditions touching and joining everything. With his last breath he uttered, "all compounded things are of the nature to decay [impermanence]"

DN 16. “Put aside the extreme of past and the extreme of future [a starting place or an ending]. I will teach you Dharma. When there is not this, there is not that. Ceasing this ceases that.” MN 2, 32.

As when I lived in Baja California, looking out at the earth, sea and sky, we are part of the elements. Our problems and upset come from our inability to deal with and accept change. But now having awareness, we step out from uncertainty to experience ourselves as part of the Dharma, how life truly is.

The Five Conditioning Processes
(Seasonal, Genetic, Natural, Karmic, and Conscious Conditioning Processes)



The present moment (the perspective of time, place and history) has five conditioning forces coming together at the ‘right time.’ In MN 38 the Buddha makes mention of the ‘three conditions’ for human birth, but the notion of ‘right time’ applies to all life. If the right conditions aren’t available or don’t exist then the energies creating that experience couldn’t come together.

For example, there are four types of birth, relating to all living things, each birth having the right condition and influence but also needing to have the ‘right time.’ There is egg born (birds and reptiles); womb born (humans and mammals); moisture born (bacteria and some insects) and finally, there is spontaneous birth, which doesn’t go through embryonic development (MN 12).

Seasonal Conditions—the physical inorganic order of temperature (hot and cold), climate (rain, drought, wind, etc.), the seasons (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter).

Genetic Conditions—cells, genes, germs, seeds, elements, minerals, vitamins, proteins, heredity (sex and reproduction), as well as evolution.

Karmic Conditions—the energy of action, and its resulting consequences and effects. On a deeper level, karma is an action carried over from

previous acts. Motives and behavior go on to play themselves out and continue as a present and future scenario. This isn't fate but how many influences combine to play an important role in each and every life moment and circumstance. Karma relates to our problem of 'suffering,' the reason for so-called 'fate or destiny,' and to the inequalities and injustices occurring within humanity.

Natural Conditions—the physical, gravitational and all the natural forces of the universe, also covering the 'supernatural' phenomena accompanying the birth and activities of a Buddha in the world.

Conscious Conditions—Encompassed here is the dimension of thought energy, mind, imagination and psychic ability. Consciousness includes the present moment understanding, awareness, insight, and wisdom through direct experience of the Dharma or having careless, everyday habit-driven ignorance.

Many Lives, Many Worlds (The World Systems)



Using the language of his present day India to communicate as a skillful means, the Buddha describes a cosmos of vast proportions and complexities, taking in many life forms and conditions as well as the cause and effect of all action.

Great patches of time mark the progress of impermanence through the cosmos ("Inconceivable indeed is the beginning of this faring on." SN 2, 118). Our short lived human lives are nothing more than a blink in the epochs of longer enduring spans, going on to generate and influence energy, life, action and change. Time is better understood as the arising, transforming and dissolving of impermanence from moment to moment. There is no fate or defined life, but each life-energy generates action, thriving and craving after life, conditioned by many influences. There are light worlds which are millions of years long (as realized by Einstein). There are severe lives of brutality witnessed in the animal kingdom. As humans, we are somewhere in the middle, having enough awareness to go beyond our habit energies and impulsive reactions.

The Planes of Existence

The States of Misery:
The Deprived and Tormented
Here are hellishly suffering and tormented lives (MN 129 and 130). There is no 'eternal' hell as nothing is permanent and, fortunately, all beings and creatures are able to better their lives. Murder, conflicts, and ignoble actions dominate here. The Ten Unwholesome actions standout.

The Brutality of the Animal Kingdom.
Battles for survival through fight/flight instinct dominate as the Ten Unwholesome actions are acted out.

The 'Wandering' Helpless
Tormented, unhappy spirits wander helplessly, searching in vain for fulfillment. The Ten Unwholesome Actions dominate.

The Planes of Fiends (Titans)
The 'Titans' who live here are in continuous conflict with each other. Here, too, the Ten Unwholesome Actions prevail.

The Joyful Realms:
The World of Human Beings
Birth as a human being is fortunate, having a combination of pleasure and pain but with the potential to realize the Dharma and better ourselves. The possibility of virtue and wisdom exist. It is as humans that 'stream-entry' to liberation, understanding the Dharma and our commitment to the Path to Peace is started.

The other states have different levels of enjoyment and less suffering lives. In the Tusita realm of happiness and delight bodhisattvas perfect themselves to return to the human realm to become Buddhas. The announced Buddha in the far off future, Maitreya, will come from this realm. The Ten Wholesome Actions as well as generosity are the behavior of these six realms.

The Realms of Fine Material Form
The beings in these planes enjoy varying degrees of meditative concentration and the beginnings of gradual detachment from sense pleasure. They range according to the level of meditative absorption developed. In the highest state the body exists as a material flux while the

distractions of the mind are temporarily brought to a stand still as the deepening of mental absorption is cultivated.

The Formless Realms

The inhabitants here are possessed entirely of mind and deep concentration. Complete detachment from the physical and sense world is known. An existence of pure concentrated-mind bliss is achieved. Having no physical body, they are unable to hear Dharma teachings. The higher meditation absorptions are distinguished.

The common characteristic of the planes of existence is impermanence: arising, transforming and dissolving and our 'wandering' through the stress and conflicts of change. The Buddha didn't emphasis a universal theory, but expressed the dominating action or karma of each being and creature as well as the cause and effects of our actions. Our motives of free will determine how our life will be lived and experienced.

Less aware or conscious creatures such as animals, or less evolved life forms, live by the ignorant action of instinct. In our human form we are fortunate to understand the Dharma and do something about our suffering and problems. We don't have to be dominated or overwhelmed by our habit energies and impulsive reactions. As the Buddha points out, there is also wisdom and compassion to help us step out from the cycles of impermanence. Wise action brings an end to suffering. The Path to Peace is leading us to insight and freedom.

Impermanence as a Salvation



By now you are wondering and seriously asking, what do all these far out theories and world systems have to do with me? This is fine but I have a job, a family of three, and mortgage payments to make. I'm sorry but all this sounds like a lot of mumbo jumbo. I just try to fit in some meditation time and get a little peace and quiet in my life. But don't jump to conclusions. Take a moment and look deeper. There are many things going on in the background behind our 'innocently' lived lives.

Take a look around you. Conflicts and military actions are raging somewhere in the world. This is closer to the Hell Realm. Monte Carlo, Las Vegas and Atlantic City cater to the temptation of money and vice. Washington DC, Beijing, Moscow, Berlin, Tokyo and other capitals are the corridors for power and corruption. Pornography is connected to Los Angeles and other known places and an attachment to the Sense Realm. Some Third World countries biggest producing crops are drug related because they are kept out of the fringes of economic development by the industrial nations. Look at the animal world, plant life, and physical universe. Each speaks for itself and the type of energy spawned and how lives are lived and expressed. You don't have to invent tall tales but have an honest look at life around you.

Take a look at your own conscious awareness prior to starting your spiritual practice to now journeying on the Path to Peace. We began in ignorance and deep seeded desires. Each of us in his or her own way has known hell and suffering, and now each of us can lead a life of wisdom. There is no 'big bang' to awakening and spiritual fulfillment, but rather a series of little bangs and connections made along the way. Change works to our benefit, too, if we know where to look and how to apply it. The Buddha steered completely away from hypothetical issues. His whole focus was the understanding of our suffering and the release from suffering. But we shouldn't reject anything because of our limited understanding.

Life Practice

A lot of our life is spent in counter productive and harmful action. I look back and see how I was at odds with myself and the world. We are distracted, consumed, fearful or down right stubborn. Not everything demands our attention or a reaction from us. We can pick and choose our way. We learn intelligent, skillful and compassionate action. Unless sirens are screeching, smoke is pouring out a window, or someone is screaming for help, then we really don't have to live the demanding, high-stressed lives that have become characteristic of our times.

Relax and bring an aware and caring attention to your life. Witness and observe as the moment arises, transforms and dissolves. Detachment, patience, acceptance and understanding are what we are cultivating as we develop equanimity.

Note how you cling and remain attached to the action and the stress caused inside you as you fight, argue and wrestle with the experience. The event can be long over with, and yet we are punishing ourselves. This is how we suffer in life. We become fist-like hard as we react. Feel, experience and know impermanence, opening one finger at a time of your impulsive nature.

Demanded by one monk to know the origin of the universe, the Buddha refused to answer. Instead he pointed to the practical and not to the theoretical. (" 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering'–I have declared…Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life…it leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana [peace]." MN 63). All we need concern ourselves with is the changes affecting us. We do have control over our motives and intentions.

Truly realizing impermanence in our lives is to begin to know freedom.

Chapter Eight

THE GREATEST ACTOR—
The Makings of Self and Our Non-self Freedom



"I will show you grasping and worry and I will show you the letting go of and freedom from grasping and worry. And what is grasping and worry? Concerning this, ordinary folk have this view: 'This body is mine, I am this, this is my self.' For one like this, the body alters and changes, and owing to this alteration and change, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair arise in him. And it is the same with his feelings, perception, mental constructs and consciousness. And what is letting go of and freedom from worry? Concerning this, the well taught noble disciple has

this view: 'This body is not mine. I am not this, this is not my self.' For one like this, the body alters and changes, but in spite of alteration and change, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair do not arise in him. And it is the same with feelings, perception, mental constructs and consciousness. Thus, there is letting go of and freedom from grasping and worry." SN 3, 19.

Who Are You?



We stop to sit and rest with the Buddha, looking out over the countryside. A river curls through the landscape. The different tones of dark and light yellows, browns and greens show in squared patterns on the land.

"When a person perceives impermanence, perception of non-self becomes established in him; and when a person perceives non-self, he arrives at the elimination of the conceit 'I am,' and that is Nirvana here and now."(UD 4, 1). The Buddha gestures with a slight wave of his right hand.

"Mean thoughts, trivial thoughts come tempting the mind and fly away; not understanding these thoughts in the mind, the heart strays chasing them back and forth. A man understanding these thoughts in his mind expels them with vigorous awareness, and one enlightened has done with them all; for no more temptation then stirs his mind." (AN 9, 3).

"In the world I see this generation racked by craving for being." The Buddha pauses, looking directly at us. "Wretched men gibbering in the face of Death, still craving, hoping, for some kind of being. See how they tremble over what they claim as 'mine,' like fishes in the puddles of a failing stream." (SN 4, 2). His voice drops off. We look at the Buddha. He shakes his head then turns back to look at the countryside.

Most everything we do in life is done in the pursuit of personal happiness as each of us tries to fulfill the person we believe ourselves to be. We struggle to have meaning, order and a sense of well being.

Again, the Buddha questioned his own life. But he was more specific and narrowed his investigation and inquiry to why we suffer and why is there suffering in the world. Our approach to life, how we live, the questions we ask leave us unsettled. If we ask for more money, a new car or a larger home, a better job, season tickets to football games, a graduate degree, the perfect mate, our lives will certainly take us in these directions. But do the questions we ask lead us to having insight and being free from suffering and our problems? Are we made better by what we have asked? And are we happy with the answers that we get?

The Buddha's father, King Suddhodanna, tried to influence Prince Siddhartha through the pursuit of riches and reputation, but Siddhartha was unfulfilled. He saw that all possessions and worldly comforts lead to suffering, disenchantment and, ultimately, dissatisfaction and a deeper questioning of life. Siddhartha ended up renouncing everyday life. He asked the most important question of all—why do we suffer? The insights that the Buddha came to know and experience were remarkable and not the typical understanding.

We have half the answer—impermanence. We live in an imperfect setting and world. Everything we have, know, possess, and love will change and at some time come to an end, leaving us dissatisfied. What does impermanence imply about us as persons?

Non-self is the third insight of the Dharma and the most challenging because of our Everyday notions of life. We experience life like we were the center of the universe with everything else revolving around us. This is an Everyday view. The Dharma connects us to the Known Truth about life. Things, moments, people (including ourselves) and all experience are made up and linked through many influences and conditions, thriving and craving to live because of the energies and the breakdown of life driving impermanence. Going for a hike around a lake, I shuddered at one point. I saw the body of water not as a lake but as a source of billions of individual drops of water forming the 'one' lake; many energies and external forces making the 'one.'

Now take a look at yourself. How special and individual do you think you are? There were our parents, schooling, friends, culture and society and personal histories all coming together to form our identity as self. Looking

at life through the awareness of the Dharma (impermanence, friction and the suffering from impermanence and non-self), many influences have mixed and match to make us. Material energy comes together to make our bodies. The body energy bonds for a time then weakens. Our characters are so many imprints of personality. There is nothing that stands out that can be identified as a self or a person. We are a non-self collection of conditions and experiences.

Mistaken with the insight of non-self is 'no self.' No self is an extreme view related to 'nothing' or annihilation and borders on chaos. Negating self while segregating the phenomena of the Dharma, no self has things as individual, without taking into account the role of Conditions Arising and the greater implications of impermanence. No self relates life as coming from nothing and ending in nothing. On the other hand, non-self reflects the truth of the Dharma, pointing to the changing conditions that contribute to life as well as the recognition that there is no individual or separate being, but a blending of body, feelings, perception, motives (mental formations), and consciousness. Misunderstanding the insight of non-self, a group of monks committed suicide. The Buddha had to reemphasize non-self as not having 'loathing' for the body but rather not to identify with it. Our awareness takes us to not being attached to body as self and the deeper realization of the non-self nature of all life (SN 54, 9).

As a way of communicating and a convenience tool of language, we refer to 'he/she, his/hers—I, me, and mine.' The pronouns are words of reference, a shorthand way to distinguish moments and serve as a description. But, unfortunately, we take I, me, and mine all too seriously. We aren't acknowledging or understanding the short-lived nature or the changes ongoing within our lives. The identification with a self and an attachment to ego is a reaction to impermanence and compounds our suffering and problems. Non-self doesn't deny the experience of a person as a mind/body interaction but simply that the 'person' we see ourselves as is empty of soul or a unique, separate person. The notion of I, me, mine and our reaction to change distances us from the truth of the Dharma.

Visualize for a moment an old fashioned coffee filter, the type that looks like a sock around a wire frame holder, and a large cup. Our minds and how they operate aren't much different. The cup is clean, clear, empty and void—a vessel. We are born innocent—clean, clear, empty and void. The filter is our mind conscious awareness sifting and collecting, filling with life

experiences. Once, we were uncluttered and simple of mind. What happened to us along the way? How did we go from an open-minded, awe struck child to being a desiring, angry, prejudice, fearful and doubting adult?

As a baby we cry out for care and feeding and our cup-like container of 'self' experiences begins to fill. Encounter after encounter, drop by drop, emotions, conditions and thoughts hit us from every direction. Soon, the overflow of experiences, trials and errors, do's and don'ts, triumphs and failures, pleasure and pain starts to collect and leads us to behaving with a certain disposition. Our once clear and empty cup-like container of 'self' have gone on to fill with feelings, culture and family pressures. Judgments form and a character jells from these life experiences. A smiling, bubbling child slowly turns into a confused, short-tempered adult; so many habits and impulses. The mind is flooded to the point of confusion, nearing a nervous breakdown.

The Monkey Mind distractions of desire, anger, dullness, restlessness and worry, and doubt and confusion become our filter for understanding while stronger habit energies take root. But unlike a filter, which cleanses and purifies, our view and understanding, our lives become clogged. The coffee filter mind becomes packed and soiled. No wonder we are unable to understand clearly and connect with the Dharma. Usually one of the habit energies of desire, anger or confusion is more dominant and becomes our discriminating way of looking at the world. An ego, a self and a personality attachment is the result. Tommy becomes a Tom who is worried and hard driven; Susie becomes a Susan who is secure and a leader; Debbie becomes a Deborah who is nervous and flees; Charlie becomes a Charles who is dominating and in control.

A lopsided personality has formed. Now there is right and wrong, ugly and beautiful, love and hate. Desires and craving emerge. Opinions and views mesh and an individual voice demands to be heard. There is hurt, resentment and anger. A character or personal connection to the world has taken hold. Attachment, insecurity and barriers of doubt are erected as battle lines are drawn. There is attachment and searching for happiness, security and meaning in the unending surge of upsetting impermanence. Identification with an image of I, me, mine form into a view of self and ego delusion. Cast is the mold of a man and a woman.

Who are we then? We have been nothing more than the greatest of actors given a part to play. The many influences and conditions in our lives from parents, friends, school and society have us acting out the roles. The persons we think we are are nothing more than a masquerade.

Sensations Pressing and Impressing



The Buddha gave the 'Fire Sermon,' stating how our senses are on fire—stimulated and agitated, sensitive and on edge. All day long our eyes see: billboards, other people, action continuously flashing by. Sounds come up from all directions: car alarms, telephones ringing, a dog barking, babies crying, the screech of chalk on a black board, voices loud or whispered. Smells drift by: Chinese cooking, a fire, jasmine tea, or body odor. Foods are tasted: the fresh morning cup of hot coffee, an Indian curry meal, peppermint gum, the sweetness of a butterscotch candy. Touch and contact occur: bumping into the edge of a desk at work, soap slipping through fingers, sanding a cabinet, typing at the computer. Thoughts race by: a memory of an elementary school teacher, our first time at the wheel of a car, a sexual fantasy, a vacation to plan.

But are we what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think? Are we really who we think we are? On one level, yes. I've cut my finger while preparing a meal. I've seen a stunning lunar eclipse. The garbage wasn't taken out and now there's a rancid smell in the house. A catfight wakes you up in the middle of the night. The memory of the time you didn't get to go to a school dance because your grades were low. It is one thing to hear something and another to personalize the situation by judging it through our habit energies. Oh, I can't stand opera. Opera is only a sound and a sound only, a vibration within our ears. Our self and ego habits and impulses have judged the sound to be good or bad, right or wrong, ugly or beautiful. A piece of silk suddenly becomes something seductive and cool but, in fact, it is only material. Our judging and projecting isn't part of the material.

While on a morning alms round the Buddha was stopped and not allowed to pass. Bahiya, who had made a long journey stood blocking the way, wanting to know the Dharma. Finally, the Buddha answered the insistent man.

"When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering." UD 1,10.

What the Buddha so concisely impressed on the long traveled man 2,500 years ago and still applies to our very own experiences here in the 21st century, is that we aren't the sound, the seen, the smelt, the tasted, the touched, or the thought. These are only sense contacts and sense contacts only experiencing the present moment. What happens after that and how we distort the moment into an I, me, mine issue is the single greatest cause for all of the problems, unhappiness, and conflicts in our lives.

The person we so highly hold ourselves to be, and make elaborate efforts to perpetuate and please, is nothing more than sense moments agitated into action and a reflex of attachments. We take things to be solid and secure, but this is the illusion of self and ego, which separates us from the truth of the Dharma.

Another way of understanding the Buddha's words is:
To see without there being someone having to see.
To smell without there being someone having to smell.
To hear without there being someone having to hear.
To taste without there being someone having to taste.
To touch without there being someone having to touch.
To know without there being a someone having to know.

By now you must be seriously wondering and asking, well, if there's no self or no one here then what do you call this person, this body, this me that I am? I'm here after all. I'm thinking!

The body and the senses are part of the Everyday understanding—the body aches and ages while the senses take in the action. The Known is having

awareness of the impermanent nature of all physical and mental experiences and how they are influenced and conditioned by many elements none of which is self. Yes, here, for the moment, we have names, birthplaces, countries of origin, and social security numbers. These are tools to help us communicate on the Everyday level. There is much more going on.

Stepping outside to look at the clear blue sky, I smiled broadly. While still a layman I was reading Ven. Walpola Rahula's **What The Buddha Taught**, finishing the chapter on non-self. It felt as though a great weight had lifted off my shoulders. For a moment, all my problems dispersed; the phantom of 'self' disappeared. Never could I have imagined there not being a self or me. But here I had just finished reading these very words—non-self. Had I needlessly suffered? Could it be that I was searching in the wrong direction? I didn't have to be who I was told to be; the obligation of family expectations, the day-to-day desires and responsibilities, finding a perfect soul mate, and then angry or disappointed when I didn't fulfill life's goals. All my confusion had come from an illusion. Our intellectual capacity as human beings is, ironically, a trap ensnaring us to Everyday desires and gratification. While I wasn't free of my habits and impulses, I was never again to be the same. I saw how all the years had marked me to deal with things through certain habit energies and impulsive reactions. I was an actor in a second rate, B movie drama. But here, my sense of self began to lose its grip.

Non-self is like peeling an onion. There is nothing inside of us to fulfill, to be attached to, worry over or achieve. To know non-self is to 'awaken.' To know non-self is to have insight into the experience of the Dharma, the true nature of life. To know non-self is to have wisdom.

The Five Groups of Self-Attachment



"Suppose a man...beheld the many bubbles on the Ganges as they drifted along, and he watched them and carefully examined them, then after he had carefully examined them they would appear to him empty, unreal and insubstantial. In exactly the same way does [one] behold all physical phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and states of consciousness—whether they

be of the past, or the present, or the future, far or near. And he watches them, and examines them carefully; and, after carefully examining them, they appear to him empty, void and without a self."

We synthesize experience through an attachment to five groups, which go on to make up our view of self and ego: body (form), feelings and sensations, perceptions, motives (mental reactions); and consciousness. The five groups demonstrate that there is no individual or separate self, nor should they be taken to be a replacement for self since that would only be another version of self! It is only through our clinging and attachment that the five groups are revealed. When we aren't attached the five groups don't surface. ("If one stays obsessed with form…feeling...perception...[mental] fabrications...consciousness, that's what one is measured by." SN 22, 36). Originally, skandhas meant 'heaps' but the Buddha used the word as five insubstantial or 'empty' groups of consciousness brought about by craving and clinging to an illusion of self. The five groups unite to make for the bit parts we play out as actors or actresses. The mind and mental awareness are referred to in different terms such as perception, mentality, consciousness, stream of consciousness, mental formations, thinking or the brain, but they are to be taken as the same and the names used are a reference according to the situation. Whatever the term, the resources of the mind are a dynamic reflection of the impermanent Dharma. Thoughts, ideas, fantasies or thinking have their conditions and influences, arise and then fade away.

Using a simple, illustrative analogy, our human experience is not unlike a four-cylinder car. There is a body (our physical form), a spinal cord transmission-like nervous system, while the four areas of mind (feelings, perceptions, motives/mental reactions and consciousness) are the four pistons of the engine that powers consciousness. Each piston driving our conscious is unique, but all four have to work together to understand and experience reality. The engine, the transmission, the body and all the other parts, none of the pieces is separate or by themselves a car (or the individual anatomy a person) but combined together make for the experience of the vehicle of self.

The five groups are all bound and subject to impermanence and are conditions within the Dharma. They aren't random or chaotic. This can be left to gamblers and the casinos. But under specific conditions and the energy generated, awakening and insight is possible. We have the expectation that wisdom happens overnight, but the universe moves slowly

over eons without any hurry. There is an infinite amount of time as change touches everything. In our present human form, we have the potential for full awakening and realization of the Dharma in our very life time. Why wait longer? Understanding is possible, suffering preventable. Only the Groups of Self Attachment stand in your way.

Our time at meditation is an isolation and pause from Everyday action and stimulation. The excitement and overflow of all our senses including thoughts, slowly is calmed and we have awareness of the Dharma. You hear about people spending years of secluded practice in forests, a cave or alone, this is done in part to eliminate Everyday conditions (one English born Tibetan nun stayed over 10 years in a cave in the Himalayas. It wasn't until local authorities found her out that she was ordered to leave.).

Body (form)

"Form is like a glob of foam…" SN 22, 95. The body is like a shell, an empty chamber. We identify with our body image but the truth is that the body changes, weakens, sickens and, ultimately, breaks down. Everything nourishing the body comes from outside. The body isn't self.

Everything in the Everyday realm has a body or shape housing and protecting it as a form. You see the body and how it changes in your children as they grow up, and we see the changes in our own bodies (losing hair, skin wrinkling and sagging, putting on weight). Change is always here.

The Buddha remarks on the error in assuming the body to be self: ***"Just as a dog, tied by a leash to a post or stake, keeps running around and circling around that very post or stake; in the same way, an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person…is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dharma—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form." SN 22, 99.***

The pleasures of the body senses through visual stimulation, enjoying sounds, smells, tastes and sexual gratification keep us pampering, clinging and attached to the body as a source of identity. We simply haven't been aware or understood the Dharma. We make contact with experiences through the Everyday body that will give out and always lead us to suffering. The pleasure ends and the body changes. The body is our first contact with the present moment.

We have already been practicing awareness of our breath and now extend the awareness to all our physiological sensations as feelings crop up and how they connect with the body. We realize the Dharma and are less attached; this isn't happening to you but to the body.

Feelings (sensations)

"Feeling is a bubble…" SN 22, 95. Like bubbles rising to the surface, feelings are evidence and a byproduct of the changing nature of life as feelings give way to other feelings. Where is the person in the array of sensations?

From the appreciation of the body experiencing the present moment come the contacts of feelings and sensations. With feeling begins the first of the four connecting mind awareness. There is no 'one' step but rather rapidly absorbed moments to complete consciousness. Stirred through the body, the moment is sensed and a sustained contact is made with our subject. Like someone knocking at the door, we feel the body-experience taking place. Feelings emerge as pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. As this point we aren't feeling as a self or a person. In the next level of consciousness comes perception where we identify and label the experience. Here we are only having a sensation. Our response to feeling is an instinct-like or Everyday survival reaction. We yearn, cling and become attached to a pleasant sensations; fear, hate, and are in aversion of painful, difficult and unpleasant sensations; or are bored and indifferent to neutral sensations. Feeling is a reflex, like when we automatically draw our hand from getting burned while cooking.

Having awareness we open to the moment as it is without becoming attached, falling apart or overreacting, connected to how the feeling began and goes on to change. We ourselves aren't pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral as persons, but only the moment is as everything moves on.

Identifying and Labeling (Perceptions)

"Perception a mirage…" SN 22, 95. Like a shimmering mirage image, perception is an illusion. As we near the mirage it disappears. The notion of self is a deception.

Through our feelings and sensations, we can now understand how we notice, name and connect to a situation. An all too quick perception or reality check is made as we identify and label a moment. Being honest, more than half the time we are off base in our perceptions. Put two people together and they are unable to agree on a color. Eyewitnesses to a crime are unable to corroborate the event. In one sad news report, a man was convicted of a series of rapes. The women came forward to identify the perpetrator. But the rapes continued until later a remarkably similar looking man was caught. The two men could have passed for twins. However, an innocent man was convicted, divorced from his wife and his life ruined all because of wrong perceptions.

A well-known example of misperception is to see a stick or rope in the road and confuse it for a snake. We have all done that. We aren't seeing or understanding things clearly. Our automatic tendency comes as a reaction from longstanding instinctive habits of survival and a defensive nature. Pent up energy of desires, fear, anxiousness, worry and hatred cause us to over react. But knowing the true nature of the Dharma, we can come to accept moments as changing and non-self and have caution in our judgments.

Perception should be an awareness and a connection with the present moment rather than a deception. Don't rush to judgment. In a museum we take our time and look at the beautiful artwork or exhibition. We should equally appreciate our life experiences.

Motives/Mental Reactions (mental formations)

"Mental Formations are a banana tree…" **SN 22, 95**. The trunk of a banana tree is so many rolled layers, having no hard wood. Underneath the personality of self there isn't to be found any self-nature, but only so many conditioned habit and impulses.

Charged with a mixed bag of memories, deceived notions, and one-sided tendencies, we aren't a self and ego, but react from a conditioned and reflex grab bag of Everyday desires, anger, fears and doubts. The 'actor' or 'actress' we play as a self steps out on stage here. Our personal history reveals itself and becomes the lens we focus to see reality. We react to the situation or the person before us. Knowing the moment for what it truly is or projecting from an illusion of self, brings us to insight or keeps us suffering and confused.

We weren't born liking and disliking, anxious and worried, desiring and needing. All our views—for voting a with a political party affiliation, for disliking beets, or not getting along with certain people—have been conditioned. Clinging and attachment has developed. Our 'mental formations' or habits and impulses are nothing more than the sum of all our experiences filling up and clouding our once clear and pure minds, giving way to a self and ego seeking ownership or dominance. Our life story is like an ongoing movie. The individual frames of experience click by. Each feeling or sensation is a flashing moment, and our mind capacity splices together the ongoing frames into one epic motion picture of self and ego. Who we see in the life story of our film is only an actor.

The source of the mental formations are our motives and intentions. Before we do, say or think there is a will or motive to actually do, say or think. This is karma, the thought before the thought. Putting it simply, you are here now on your spiritual journey because of your motives. You could have the intention to be slumped in front of the TV or at the local bar, but you have chosen to investigate and understand.

The Charming Illusion (consciousness)

"Consciousness [is] a magical trick…" SN 22, 95. Like a magician creating an illusion, where is self to be found? Consciousness is a charming trick; the deception alluring and beguiling, but unreal.

Clinging and attached to an idea of self and permanence, consciousness then is grasped through the Groups of Self Attachment. If our consciousness is distracted or deceived, the present moment is distracted and deceived. Being unaware, we live a life that is closer to fiction and a fairytale. Out of our disjointed and confused consciousness, we experience and live in Everyday carelessness.

There is an Everyday consciousness where we react out of self-imagined desire, hatred or delusion, or there is the Known consciousness of being fully in the present moment whether it be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. There is careless action and there is wise action.

What had been taken to be the subconscious is now exposed, and the intricacies of the mind and how consciousness forms is understood. People, events, moments, encounters—life hasn't just been happening at random, but bubbles to the surface with our every motive, and carries over as action.

We have been doing, acting and reacting not out of free will but a disguised personal attachment. From clinging to the Groups of Self Attachment, consciousness is categorized and defined, making the present moment a self-delusion. We forever victimize ourselves by reliving the past. This is how we cope and survive in the Everyday world.

Unaware of the many influences leading us on, our 'awakening' is to know and realize responsibility, having a deeper realization of the Dharma.

Life Practice

Take a break from being yourself. Most times we are in a non-stop frenzy of judging, discriminating and projecting. We are all too wound up. Having to be your self is no easy job.

Appreciate each of your six senses and how they connect you to the present moment. Our experiences happen in separate but quick fire instances. The afternoon is bright, a loud noise sounds, there is a fresh scent in the air, the taste of an orange, cold is felt, something you have to do comes to mind. Each sense contact is experienced separately, but occurs so fast that we get them jumbled together and become confused. Cultivate the awareness for spaciousness and detachment before being overwhelmed by habit energies and impulsiveness reactions.

Non-self doesn't mean that we should just go out and live it up. No, that would be an Everyday fulfillment. As soon as the good times run out we would be back to being unhappy, craving after and in search of better times. Misunderstood in our spiritual practice is the freedom from selfish attachments and desires. We don't become another person, but rather are liberated from the Everyday person.

The Jewel of the Buddha's awakening is that we don't have to be the person we think we are. We don't have to be anyone for anyone. When we do get overwhelmed, we let go, right ourselves and carry on. This is awakening. This is Knowing. We understand and bring patience and compassion to our lives. Why fight with a self that doesn't exist? We have been deceived by our clinging and attachment to self and ego. When you stop struggling, demanding, having expectations or unrealistic desires, the burden and stress of self lifts like being weightless and the mind opens and expands. This is how simple practice can be. We are more than creatures of habit. We argue,

fight, go to war, all to justify our self and ego perception, our opinions and views. Our motives are wrapped up in selfishness and ignorance.

When you act out of self you suffer. When you know non-self you are wise.

Chapter Nine

THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF KARMA—
The Compelling Motives Leading to the Actions of Our Lives



"It is hard to find beings who can admit to freedom from mental sickness for even a moment, except those who have destroyed the defilements [habit energies]." AN 2, 143.

"…intention [motivation] is karma. When one intends, one acts by deed, word or thought." AN 2, 82.

"I recollected my manifold past lives…many eons of cosmic contraction and expansion…directed it [my mind] to the knowledge of the passing

away and reappearance of beings. I saw beings passing away and re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their karma…I directed it [my mind] to the knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations [habit energies]…My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the fermentation of sensuality, released from the fermentation of becoming, released from the fermentation of ignorance." MN 36.

"When the mind is unguarded, bodily action is unguarded, speech and mental actions are also unguarded. In him whose bodily action, speech and mental action are unguarded they are saturated with [habit energies]. When they are thus saturated with [habit energies] they are rotten.

"When the mind is guarded, bodily action also is guarded, speech and mental action are also guarded. In whom they are not saturated with [habit energies] so they are not rotten." A 1.

The Karma Connection



The Buddha has been doing walking meditation on an open patch of land between two trees. We sit watching him. He moves slowly, hands cupped together at waist level, eyes cast down. His every step is a step of awareness for what he is doing: raising his leg, stretching forward to take a step, planting his foot to touch the ground gently, then simultaneously the trailing back foot leaving the ground in a lifting heel-toe movement. He walks twenty-five paces, turns around in a smooth shift of body, pauses for a moment then walks back in the other direction. The walking meditation goes on for a half hour. He comes back over towards us and sits down. He waits until we are both settled before speaking.

"What is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and

influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise. What is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?" He is looking directly at us but doesn't wait for an answer. "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior. (MN 135).

"Thus karma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture. The consciousness of living beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving is established in (tuned to) a lower element. Thus there is the production of renewed becoming [transferring karma energy] in the future. (AN 3, 76)

"We are the result of what we were and will be the result of what we are. Past, present and future lives are linked through wholesome and unwholesome mental processes (SN)… As rust, arisen out of iron eats itself away, even so his own deeds lead the transgressor to states of woe (DH 240)…Bad karma takes effect at the opportune moment. An evil deed committed does not immediately bear fruit, just as milk curdles not at once; smoldering, it follows the fool like fire covered with ashes (AN 1, 21)…The fool may be known by his deeds. The wise one may be known by his deeds. Wisdom is illuminated by one's deeds." (AN 1, 101).

The Dharma of impermanence points simply to action. Karma literally means action and when we look at the action of our lives it all begins, has a first expression and is channeled through our motives. The understanding and wisdom of the Buddha is vast and profound, but the focus and concern is understanding how actions have led us to suffering and how to stop suffering action.

Karma is misunderstood as a far out Eastern foolishness. Here in the West we are a practical culture of instant results and quick gains. We tend to dismiss things that aren't immediately useful or understood. What we see, hear, taste, smell, touch, and can think is all that we imagine and care to know, the Everyday. But our eyes can't see infra-red light or x-rays and yet they exist, our ears can't hear the higher frequency that most other animals do, our smell, taste and touch are also weak, while our mental insight and realization is limited by Monkey Mind distractions and our habits. Behind all our doubts is the imposing influence of karma.

At first glance, karma is straightforward, but to understand and penetrate its full significance is something very profound. The Buddha mentioned that all its complicated implications could drive you crazy (AN 4, 77). Confusing the issue is that karma has been completely misunderstood by the general public. There are two versions of karma. One is the Hindu interpretation and the other is Dharma insight. Hindu karma gives a cause and effect; a results and consequences to karma. We do something and the retribution of our actions brings about a certain karma or outcome (also the Hindu religion has a rebirth of a definite, immortal soul or person unlike the Dharma's non-self). In this version of karma, destiny and fate play a role that makes events as unchangeable and set in their ways. We are who we are and there is nothing we can do about it.

The karma of the Dharma, the true nature of life, is completely different. Here karma is strictly the motivation, will or intention driving and compelling us to act; the thought before the thought or the thought before the action. Karma then is the 'pre-thought,' which leads us to action. What the exact consequences and results to our actions will be or their outcome can't be anticipated. There is no destiny or fate, but personal responsibility and choice is involved. We will look at how the transferring of karma energy takes place later in the chapter, but it is a transfer of energy which comes about from many conditions and influences and isn't an immortal soul or specific person.

But where does karma come from? At different platforms in life motives have a different appearance. On the greater universal scale of impermanence, karma is in the background as the architect or the instinct of thriving and craving generated from impermanence compelling and moving the cosmos, urging it to arise, transform and dissolve. This isn't a haphazard change of events and circumstances, but karma is a natural checks and balances of force and energy characterizing the causes and effects that everything must go through. Whether it is a human, animal, plant, or mineral, each in its own way (even the elemental forces of extension, cohesion, temperature and motion are dominated and influenced by karmic design) as a reaction to impermanence 'craves' for life to survive, better serve and suit its needs and position. In regards to our own personal life experiences, karma appears as longstanding habit energies and impulsive reactions through our motives to act and react, having a certain conditioned

disposition or tendency. From a selfish view of I, me, mine and attachment, our habit energies are very much alive, build up and carry over.

Six basic qualities mark our motives and define our lives: the three Wise (or Wholesome) Actions of generosity, good will and wisdom, and the three Unwise (or Unwholesome) Actions of desire, hatred and confusion. These six motives shape and develop our characters-to-be.

Whatever actions we do physically through our body is considered 'body karma.' When we speak and express ourselves this is 'verbal karma.' When we think plan or desire this is 'mental karma.' Within the Wise and Unwise Action of body, speech and mind are ten beneficial and ten harmful behaviors. This isn't a morality play but how wisdom and insight of the Dharma is reflected through our intention—ignorance and carelessness or having awareness and understanding.

The Ten Beneficial Actions are: not taking life and being considerate one has a compassionate mind; not stealing one is generous and has an honest mind; being sexually responsible our mind is pure and settled (these three actions are performed through the body); speaking truthfully, gently, without harming and respectfully, our speech is kind (four areas of speech); not being envious or desirous one is satisfied; not hating we have friendship and are generous; having no doubts and being clear minded we have knowledge of the Dharma (three mind related actions).

The Ten Harmful Actions of body, speech and mind are: three harmful bodily actions—killing, stealing and sexual misconduct; four unwise actions of speech—lying, slandering or divisive speech, speaking harshly, and engaging in idle chatter or frivolous speech and gossip; three Unwise mental actions—coveting, ill will, and having wrong views or misunderstanding.

Knowing and understanding the role that our motives play is important because deep seated habit energies are at the root of our suffering and their energy carries over. Our habits not only influence the present moment, but also go on to manifest itself in future situations. Karma is dynamic and real and not just a point of debate or philosophical curiosity. Just as a fire has embers that spark it and continue the flame, karma smolders in the background of our lives. What direction our motives will take us in comes down to our choosing.

The karma connection becomes clear during our meditations as we try to calm down and concentrate. Racing thoughts, surrealistic fantasies, sexual desires, out of control anger and regrets, habit energies cloud our minds. But as we settle down we start to clearly see all our impulsive reactions like in a pool of water; how the many conditions form into misperceptions of self and ego. It can be difficult and painful to face up to these images. But with practice and patience, we begin to see that there is spaciousness within us as awareness begins to emerge. Understanding and wisdom are our direct experience of the Dharma.

Behind the chattering of internal voices, what we are experiencing is the impulse of habits jabbering away to become motives. Karma rumbles, promoting actions. "In the same way, it is impossible for one with a turbid mind to understand either his own benefit or the benefit of others, or to realize higher states. And why? Because of the turbid state of the mind…In the same way, it is possible for one with a tranquil mind to understand his own benefit and the benefit of others, and to realize higher states. And why? Because of the untroubled state of his mind." AN 1, 9.

A woman I know is driven by desires for good times and to be continually entertained in her life. As a teenager she was very ill while also coming from a broken home. The habit energies and impulsive reactions motivating her are to crave for 'good times.' She is forever on the run to please herself, leading a dizzying life. A psychologist I know seeks to always dominate and control the situation. His longstanding problems are a result of insecurity and the sibling rivalry he experienced as a boy. A drug addict or alcoholic have the overwhelming habit energy and impulsive reaction to drown and blot out their misery and insecurity. We have all been victims at one time or another and have suffered. Within the Dharma words like 'good or bad,' or 'right or wrong' aren't generally used. There is intelligent action and careless action. The distinction is important because there is no blame but points to conditions, influences, and circumstances as having an effect on us, as well as our own choices.

But karma is always even handed. When events go our way and we are happy it is from our understanding and having done things 'wisely;' when we suffer and are upset it is because we have been unaware and 'careless,' taking things for granted. Even the hardened criminal, abused or angry person is capable of having awareness and insight. "By yourself alone it was done. It is just you that will experience the fruit thereof." AN 1, 138.

All day long and even touching our sleep and restful moments, we are stressed and upset through longstanding habits and our motives. The past in the present, unfolding complex and interwoven life moments; a kaleidoscope of turning and spinning karmic patterns coming to persist in our lives. In the next chapter on Conditions Arising we will see how the Five Groups of Self Attachment connect to the past, present and future of our lives, but for now we will continue examining and becoming more familiar with how our motives affect our lives.

Karma in Action



The classic example of karma is that of a corralled herd of cattle. Weighty Karma is the bull or the strongest motive to come forward from the herd; Proximate Karma happens to be that cow which is closest to the gate to come out as a reaction; Habitual Karma is the lead cow heading the group and our most common reaction; and Random Karma can be any one of a number of motives coming forward.

Weighty Karma

A great deal of our life has to do with 'weighty' or dominating karma as desire, anger and confusion make up an ongoing theme in our lives. Some people are moved by fear and insecurity that goes on to paralyze and consume their lives; other persons have a strong anger that seems to always get the better of them; another person can be selfish; someone else can be desiring and unsettled. The same can be true of the wise actions of kindness, generosity, patience, good will and sharing as being the focus of our lives.

Weighty karma is also important at the time of our passing away as a 'final thought.' The dominating, strong willed habit energy of our lives usually shows itself at this time. If we have murdered or been caring, abusive or abused, desiring or sharing, cheated or generous, hateful or kind, this can lead us to a future of hellish suffering or a pleasant life.

Proximate Karma

Proximate karma is going with our first instinct. When caught in deadlines, stuck in commuter traffic, multi-tasking at work, juggling the many responsibilities of having a family, job, and going to night school, all tend to lead one into proximate karma.

Life is happening so fast that we can't think clearly. We are trying to cope and are on edge. Tides of emotions overwhelm us as we give way to whatever it takes to get by. This shows the unpredictable and unclear outcome that is karma.

Habitual Karma

Coming from longstanding impulses, we act out of conditioning. Unaware and absent minded, we live in an instinctive tendency of compromising actions and conditioned life suffering. When dislike, boredom, anger or fear show themselves we feel uncomfortable or delusion, confusion or fantasy can torment us.

Once seeing someone eating, my hand automatically came up to my mouth and touched my lips. This just goes to show how sneaky habitual karma is. We think we are doing the right thing, but really are guided by habits. Lack of mindfulness is the contributing factor.

Our bodies give off tell tale signs of karma: a nervous twitch or forced smile; stuttering when unnerved or angry; shoulders hunched over when we are depressed; a rolling of the eyes or wrinkling of the forehead when threatened or in doubt. Observe as your habitual karma reveals itself.

Habitual karma is like a magnet which 'pulls in' similar responses. A patient and generous person draws friends. An angry person will absorb suffering and bitterness. A selfish person will usually come up needy. A lustful person gives in to desires. Habitual karma plays a deciding dynamic in the transferring of karma energy.

Random Karma

How is it that we hum some long forgotten tune or a person we haven't thought of in decades comes to mind? This is an example of random karma. Confused in our thinking, random karma shows how motives can pop up at any time. It is kind of like the weeds that appear after all our yard cleaning—under the right conditions the karma and habit energies show themselves. The distractions of the Monkey Mind have that impulsive

tendency of whatever-the-dice-rolls-will-be. We all know people who like to do things on a whim. This is random karma motivating them. The person can also have bouts of kindness and affection while being mischievous, annoying and joyful.

Bordering on the irresponsible, random karma appears silly as a wild flash of associations and memories are triggered. People who are impulsive, blurt things out, and who don't plan well are all victims of random karma. Horoscopes, astrology, buying a lottery ticket, are all putting credence into the 'random' side of life. Artistic imagination is linked with random karma, allowing for the creative juices to flow.

Presented here has been karma as a tendency to act and react. Harming or killing leads us to short lived lives and being prone to disease, sickness, anger and fear. Physical deformity and disabilities come from vicious actions.

Stealing or taking what isn't your own creates the effect of poverty, misery, and having unfulfilled desires and being dependent.

Sexual misconduct creates enemies, unstable relationships as well as being prone to disease.

Lying and careless speech can lead to abuse, being vilified, distrusted, nervousness and having chronic disease.

The Buddha straightforwardly explained karma to a student: ***"There is the case where a woman or man is a killer of living beings, brutal, bloody-handed, given to killing and slaying, showing no mercy to living beings…This is the way leading to a short life…But then there is the case where a woman or man, having abandoned the killing of living beings…This is the way leading to a long life.***

"There is the case where a woman or man is one who harms beings with his or her fists, with clods, with sticks, or with knives...This is the way leading to sickliness…But then there is the case where a woman or man is not one who harms…This is the way leading to health.

"There is the case, where a woman or man is ill-tempered and easily upset; even when lightly criticized, he/she grows offended, provoked,

malicious, and resentful; shows annoyance, aversion, and bitterness...This is the way leading to ugliness…But then there is the case where a woman or man is not ill-tempered or easily upset…This is the way leading to beauty.

"There is the case where a woman or man is envious. He/she envies, begrudges, and broods about others' gains, honor, respect, reverence, salutations, and veneration…This is the way leading to no prominence...But then there is the case where a woman or man is not envious…This is the way leading to prominence.

"There is the case where a woman or man is not a giver of food, drink, cloth, sandals, garlands, scents, ointments, beds, dwellings, or lighting to priests or contemplatives…This is the way leading to poverty…But then there is the case where a woman or man is a giver of food, drink, cloths…This is the way leading to great wealth.

"There is the case where a woman or man is obstinate and arrogant…This is the way leading to a low birth…But then there is the case where a woman or man is not obstinate or arrogant…This is the way leading to a high birth.

"There is the case where a woman or man when visiting a priest or contemplative, does not ask: 'What is skillful, venerable sir? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? What, having been done by me, will be for my long-term harm and suffering? Or what, having been done by me, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?'…This is the way leading to stupidity…But then there is the case where a woman or man when visiting a priest or contemplative, asks: 'What is skillful, venerable sir? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated?...This is the way leading to discernment.

"So, student, the way leading to short life makes people short-lived, the way leading to long life makes people long-lived; the way leading to sickliness makes people sickly, the way leading to health makes people healthy; the way leading to ugliness makes people ugly, the way leading to beauty makes people beautiful; the way leading to lack of influence makes people uninfluential, the way leading to influence makes people

influential; the way leading to poverty makes people poor, the way leading to wealth makes people wealthy; the way leading to low birth makes people low-born, the way leading to high birth makes people highborn; the way leading to stupidity makes people stupid, the way leading to discernment makes people discerning.

"Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have their actions as their arbitrator. Action is what differentiates beings in terms of baseness and excellence." MN 135.

Karma does get complex and involved, but karma isn't fate or destiny. We do have personal responsibility and wisdom to redirect our strong habits.

The Transferring of Our Karma Energy



Prompted by our motives, karma is the energy of the mind. We don't see, touch or hold this energy, but nevertheless it is real and has repercussions. Like the wind, karma is stirred up and put into motion through conditioning forces, and like the wind, which we can't see, karma goes on to affect everything. From the arising, transforming, and dissolving of impermanence comes an instinctive energy for survival; through these habit energies we crave after then go on to become attached; motives go on to affect the action of our lives. There is a clear trail of transferred karmic dynamics.

At this moment there is a puzzled look on your face. Something isn't making sense to you. There is a leap in logic and a grand assumption going on. On the one hand there is non-self and no immortal soul or person, are we now implying here that with motives and karma that there are past lives? Having a forethought or motive then something surely had to come before, but what exactly is happening? If consequences and results follow, doesn't this mean that there are future lives? What then in our actions is promoted and passed on and how does the transferring of karma energy occur?

Seeing our lives as a long film, look at a cut from your present life experience. In the same way as a film has frames of action connecting it similarly the memories and energy moments of our lives are also spliced together and the transfer of habit energy continues. Earlier (Chapter Five on the Monkey Mind) the association of the 'past in the present' was mentioned where past action and memory associations come to charge our present lives as deep seated motives are stirred up. Whatever we experience in the present moment connects first with our senses as we go on to have a conscious awareness of the moment (a mind/body connection). The mind/body contact through the Five Groups of Self Attachment give the illusion of the person we take ourselves to be as we act and react to the changing moments throughout the busy day. With each contact our whole life story of memories, perceptions and experiences (motives) is passed on to our next experience as habit energies are projected and continuously play themselves out. All those flashes of memories and rapid fire associations that we have, the little voices gnawing inside our heads, the urge to act and react, the desire, anger and confusion are a gallery of spliced film motives collected as karma energy.

We are actors of an Everyday life story. The dominant flashes of experience go on to become the recurrent themes of our lives (motives or karma). Meditating and deepening our awareness is like using the remote control device for a DVD player. We pause and stop, understanding our life story.

This is how karma is experienced as a present moment action, but what about the past and future experience? Our physical body is a gross energy, weakening and breaking down to dissolve at death (impermanence touching all of us) going from physical matter and returning to the pure energy of the Four Dynamic elemental forces. Mind energy, though subject to impermanence, is longer lasting and thrives in a different way, continuing as a motive (the thought before the thought or the thought before our action) of energy intent, using the body as a vehicle for communication through the senses. The all important 'final thought' is carried over as an energy and not a person.

The closest connection we have of death and a 'final thought' is during our sleep. As our body energy relaxes, mind energy stands out and comes to the forefront. Who hasn't been consumed while trying to sleep with thoughts of anger, foreboding, sexual fantasies, trips down memory lane, regrets, or wild dreams? While sleeping we sink into the depths of karmic potential. At first

our dreams seem unintelligible but looking deeper into them you can see desire, fear, hatred, lust and confusion. Now understanding how karma affects our lives, the bigger picture of the Dharma begins to reveal itself and become clearer: impermanence, craving after, lead to an attached self and problems, and our 'wandering' through Everyday suffering. With some concentrated effort and practice you can make sleep a mindful extension of your spiritual practice.

Three things are required in the making of an infant—the right time of the month for the mother, the union of male sperm and female egg, and also the conscious connection that is established through the transferring karma (MN 38). Once all three factors are in place, the mind energy joins to complete the embryonic process and the fetus begins to crave with the characteristics of motivated energy. The 'final thought' at the moment of death is very much alive and immediately makes the psychic jump from the 'old' body and is transferred into an impregnated embryo.

The 'final thought' karma isn't a destiny or fate. There is always choice and responsibility in the matter. A murderer can genuinely repent at his deathbed and his mental energy then send him into a state of good intention (However, that past action of murder will come to play itself out at some point.). Another person may have led a good life, but if his or her last thought dwells on greed, lust or hatred then it is that energy which is transferred as a karmic connection. A person who has refined his or her habits from jealousy, anger and contempt to joy, friendship and responsibility will lead a less suffering and problematic life. This is why having awareness and being mindful of our actions, speech and thoughts is stressed in our spiritual practice. Our motives lead us to Wise Action or to continued troubles through Unwise Action.

"And what is the result of karma? The result of karma is of three sorts, I tell you: that which arises right here and now [in the present], that which arises later [in this lifetime], and that which arises following that [in the future]..." AN 6, 63. Karma is like seeds, which come alive under the right conditions, including the conditions for our spiritual journey on the Path to Peace.

Having lived in Baja California for a stint, its geography of desert life were new to me. I saw how harsh conditions made the thorny cactus and created the venomous snakes. These were the compelling conditions and influences affecting everything. Under different karmic conditions, the desert would be

a forest and its life would take on an entirely different shape, consciousness and karma. Looking back at the example of Angulimala, the one time murderer, if he could be transformed into a peaceful monk then there is potential for all of us. But it is hard to break free from the domination of our habit energies, the impulse of karma.

This lag or time warp of karma accounts for why a seemingly good person can suffer and meet up with tragedy and why also troubled people seem to be fortunate. The more profound questions as to why there is poverty, children victimized, physically and mentally handicapped people, karma (motives) is the determining factor. We are only seeing the results, but episodes and events have transpired over long instances of time. Only our wisdom and understanding our relationship to the Dharma can stop unwise action from coming to fruition.

You can better understand karma through analogies and examples rather than intellectual explanations. Think of karma as a blood transfusion. All the biological make up or 'karma' drawn is then transferred. The 'old self' of the donor isn't the same, but like a blood transfusion, the habitual and impulsive characteristics of the donor go on to thrive in the 'new' body. Or try imagining karma as a kidney or heart transplant, the energy of the 'old' organ continues thriving in the 'new' body. Karma can also be seen as a radio wave, which is invisible and carries a message, traveling over distances and time. Karma is most often expressed in terms of a fire spreading. The fire changes as it spreads and yet the basic flame is the same. Elements and willing forces come together, unite, mix, and separate. Are they the same? Not exactly. Is the person the same today as he or she was yesterday? Not exactly. Is life destined? Not exactly. Karma allows for the complex directions of life.

"But there are unskillful things not yet given up, things tainted, leading to rebirth, fearful, of painful result in the future, things associated with birth, decay and death. And it is for the giving up of these things that I teach Dharma. However, if you practice correctly, these tainted things will be given up, and the things that lead to purification will grow and develop. In this very life you will attain the fullness of perfect wisdom by your own knowledge and vision, and abide in it." DN 3, 55.

Everyday Karma and Known Karma



Visiting San Francisco to see a Buddhist themed movie after being some time in a temple in the quieter East Bay, I saw how people displayed and projected their karma through the simple ways they dressed and behaved. Dark glasses in unusual colors of orange and purple, excessive jewelry of chains and rings, the latest trend setting clothes, hair styles to match, and exotic tattoos to top it all off. Sports cars and oversized vehicles sped by and loud music boomed. There is nothing wrong with any of this, but their fashions and life style as intention were taking them in a certain direction and announced something about themselves. As I walked to the movie theater I could literally see the weight and burden of each person, the karmic intent, being dragged around like a ball and chain. Of course, being in a monastic robe I was conveying my karma and intention. There was a difference in the Everyday and the Known.

A group of ascetics imitating dogs and oxen during the time of the Buddha approached him to ask about the outcome of their practice. The Buddha went on to explain four types of karma (dark, bright, dark and bright, and neither-dark-nor-bright, leading to the destruction of action) and concluded, "A being's reappearance is due to a being [there being a self]; one reappears through the karmas [motivated actions] one has performed…Thus, I say beings are the heirs of their actions." (MN 57).

As regularly practicing meditators and having awareness, we have an advantage in knowing what is happening to us. We sit with our anger, desires, anxiety and unsettled minds, watching the play of karmic intent come forward then disappear. We breathe in recognition, coming to know that it has been karma knocking and intruding on your consciousness and compelling us on.

If you still find yourself doubting karma, think about the following analogy. Picture yourself on a hilltop with a boulder in front of you. You push the boulder over the edge and it rolls and crashes down the hillside. This is the equivalent of karmic intent. The rock careening down the hill and smashing

into things is the result and consequence of our actions. As we then try to go down the hillside, the trail following the boulder's path becomes our own life experience—careless and foolish, or skillful and wise.

Life Practice

To help put you at ease about karma, the Buddha didn't just snap his fingers and become the Buddha. Over the course of many karmic lifetimes of practicing, learning, realizing, taking some backward steps along the way, bringing his habit energies under control and transforming them, only then did Siddhartha Gotama penetrate the Dharma and become the Buddha. The good news for us is that we have the Path to Peace to follow. The Buddha noted, "Do not think lightly of goodness saying, 'Nothing will help me improve.' A pitcher is filled with water by a steady stream of drops. Likewise, the wise person improves and achieves well-being a little at a time." DH 122.

Careless motives give off a spark, carrying the flame of karma. But what happens when there is no self-promoted flame, if there were no ego sparks? Could it be? Peace can be known and lived.

Our spiritual journey is an investigation and journey of deepening awareness. We get distracted and sidetracked by desires, anger, restlessness, worry and doubt. One moment we are centered and in the next we stumble. Karma is our own personal guide book. The will and intent live itself out on some level unless we understand and transform it. Karma is a generator. Whatever action we do will likely spark a similar reaction.

Karma can be confusing so we are better off focusing on the present moment and our immediate motives. Be with your breath, your feelings and with the motives whirling inside your head. Listen, feel and know what you are doing. What's my intention here? What was I trying to get at? What did I mean by saying that? Why did I do that? Can I do something differently the next time around? Having awareness we control our lives.

How many times have I been unaware and distracted, even now as a monastic? But I laugh because in one moment I am deeply aware of my intentions and in control, but then I slip and in the next moment I am closer to being Bozo the Clown. Our folly is a learning experience. I knew of one woman who was fond of saying after a lapse in judgment, "Not yet a

Buddha! Not yet!" She would always smile, showing forgiveness and acceptance for herself. We need to be patient with ourselves.

If you are hungry, how often do you just scarf the food down in great gulps? This is closer to being an animal. If you are hurried notice how close to panicked and out of control or fearful you are. The habit energy carries over to keep us worried and stressed. If you are angry, notice how much closer you are to threatened and inconvenienced. Familiarize yourself with the signs and clues from your habit energies.

One way of coming to terms with our anxieties and karma energy is to meditate for 5 to 15 minutes or longer before going to sleep. Quietly sit at the edge of the bed. Feel what energies or questions you are still carrying with you from the day. Breathe deeply. Relax your body and clear your minds of stress and conflicts. Note how at this late hour thoughts and feelings are more subtle and disguised in the form of a 'whisper' echoing through our minds and softly pulsing through our bodies. Simply pulling over the covers doesn't end the upset nor does the stimulation of some late night sex put an end to it either, while sleeping pills only blur a conflict. Feel the energy trapped within you and how you can release it and find peace with your stirring karma. One way or another, the habit energy will find a release or expression. It is better to mindfully and compassionately deal with it rather than doing something that later you will regret. What do you think nightmares are? What are sleepless, tossing and turning nights all about? They are karmic intent. Make your bed time a moment of peace.

The Buddha mentioned if we were only to commit a foolish act once and never do it again, our karma would be corrected through our wise intention. "If a man is one who steals...indulges in illicit sex...tells lies, then taking into consideration time spent doing and not doing, whether by day or by night, which time is more: the time he spends telling lies or the time he spends not telling lies?... So, reflecting thus, he abandons right then the taking of life [or stealing, illicit sex, lies, etc.] and in the future refrains…This is how there comes to be the abandoning of that evil deed. This is how there comes to be the transcending of that evil deed." SN XLII, 8. In another discourse the Buddha adds, "But because you see your transgression as such and make amends in accordance with the Dharma, we accept your confession. For it is a cause of growth in the Dharma and discipline of the noble ones when, seeing a transgression as such, one makes amends in accordance with the Dharma and exercises restraint in the future." DN 2.

A turn around doesn’t come overnight, but we are all much further along now than when we began our spiritual journey. We are wisely experiencing truth in our lives.

Knowing karma, we take full responsibility for our actions.

Chapter Ten

CONDITIONS ARISING—
The Becoming of Everything



"Deep is this Conditions Arising, and deep its appearance. It is because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dharma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, and bad destinations." DN 15.

Conditions Arising



"I will teach you the origination of the world and the ending of the world. Listen and pay close attention."

We sit together under the shade of a tree. The afternoon is warm and without a breeze. The Buddha's voice carries softly. Having shared with us the truth of the Dharma (impermanence and non-self as well as karma) he brings the complete understanding of life experience together for us.

"And what is the origination of the world? Dependent on the eye and forms there arises eye-consciousness. The meeting of the three is contact…dependent on the ear and sounds there arises ear-consciousness…dependent on the nose and aromas there arises nose-consciousness. The meeting of the three is contact...dependent on the tongue and flavors there arises tongue-consciousness. The meeting of the three is contact...dependent on the body and tactile sensations there arises body-consciousness. The meeting of the three is contact...dependent on the intellect and mental qualities there arises intellect-consciousness. The meeting of the three is contact. From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling. From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance. From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. This is the origination of the world.

"Now, from the remainderless cessation and fading away of that very craving comes the cessation of clinging/sustenance. From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress and suffering. This is the ending of the world." SN 12, 44.

We have a doubtful look, not understanding all of the complicated sequence or the implications. The Buddha breathes an encouraging smile and we faintly smile back.

*"**I will describe and analyze Conditions Arising for you." His voice drops in tone.***

"And what is ignorance? Not knowing stress, not knowing the origination of stress, not knowing the cessation of stress, not knowing the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called ignorance.

"And what are fabrications [our motives or karma]? These three are fabrications: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, mental fabrications. These are called fabrications.

"And what is consciousness? These six are classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, intellect-consciousness. This is called consciousness.

"And what is name-and-form ['self']? Feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention: This is called name. The four great elements, and the form dependent on the four great elements: This is called form. This name and this form are called name-and-for ['self'].

"And what are the six sense media? These six are sense media: the eye-medium, the ear-medium, the nose-medium, the tongue-medium, the body-medium, the intellect-medium. These are called the six sense media.

"And what is contact? These six are classes of contact: eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, intellect-contact. This is called contact.

"And what is feeling? These six are classes of feeling: feeling born from eye-contact, feeling born from ear-contact, feeling born from nose-contact, feeling born from tongue-contact, feeling born from body-contact, feeling born from intellect-contact. This is called feeling.

"And what is craving? These six are classes of craving: craving for forms, craving for sounds, craving for smells, craving for tastes, craving for tactile sensations, craving for ideas. This is called craving.

"And what is clinging/sustenance? These four are clingings: sensuality clinging, view clinging, precept and practice clinging, and doctrine of 'self' clinging. This is called clinging.

"And what is becoming? These three are becomings: sensual becoming, form becoming, and formless becoming. This is called becoming.

"And what is birth? Whatever birth, taking birth, descent, coming-to-be, coming-forth, appearance of aggregates, and acquisition of [sense] media of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called birth.

"Now what is aging and death? Whatever aging, decrepitude, brokenness, graying, wrinkling, decline of life-force, weakening of the faculties of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called aging. Whatever deceasing, passing away, breaking up, disappearance, dying, death, completion of time, break up of the aggregates, casting off of the body, interruption in the life faculty of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called death.

"Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering." SN 12, 2.

Here now we smile with the Buddha.

Penetrating the Dharma brings us to a personal experience in understanding our habit driven 'wandering.' Conditions Arising is our realization of how our self and ego nature is played out, demonstrating the intimate connection of many influences carrying over from the past which makes our present and then goes on to affect our future. Prior to his enlightenment as well as afterwards, the Buddha deeply contemplated the interaction confirming Conditions Arising. "From my appropriate attention there came the breakthrough of discernment: 'Consciousness doesn't exist when name-and-form ['self'] doesn't exist. From the cessation of name-and-form ['self'] comes the cessation of consciousness.' (SN 12, 65)…As phenomena grows clear to the [noble one, the devoted practitioner]—ardent, absorbed—his doubts all vanish when he discerns what has a cause." (UD 1, 1).

Also known as Dependent Co-Arising, Dependent Origination or Conditioned Genesis, the name Conditions Arising is used here. The plural 'conditions' expresses the connection of the many dharmas (life elements and the characteristics of nature) and influences which go into the making of a moment of experience. Not an intellectual wrangling or argument, Conditions Arising is the truth of the Dharma. To know the truth is to understand how and why we live the way we do as well as our 'awakened' and liberating potential. Conditions Arising is the natural science or universal 'blueprint,' chronicling the forming aspects of impermanence (the arising, the transforming and the dissolving). Though the sequence may be difficult to understand at times, there is no chance or chaos to life, nor are things set as a fate or destiny, but a real life relationship through purposeful action. The dynamic sequence can be applied both to the psychological and physical worlds.

Summed up as a simple wisdom ("This being that exists; through the arising of this that arises. This not being, that does not exist; through the ceasing of this that ceases." MN 79 also UD 1, 2 and UD 1, 3), don't dismiss and trivialize or be misled by the straightforward expression of Conditions Arising. The Buddha chided his personal attendant, Ananda, for taking for granted and assuming Conditions Arising to "seem as clear as clear can be" DN 15. "He who sees Conditions Arising sees the Dharma; he who sees the Dharma sees Conditions Arising." MN 28.

Being a child of Old World European traditions, the dominant influence was the strict energy compelling me to be 'Spanish.' This became my habit energies turned to motives (karma) which came through as the Conditions Arising in my life. Over the years I was exposed to the easier going American mainstream influences and slowly these alternate conditions began to influence my life, smooth out my rough edges and have an impact on me. When I came in contact with the Dharma in my late 30's, I was influenced by the peaceful and penetrating approach. The practice of virtue, meditation and understanding has brought me to where I am today. Knowing and applying the Dharma to my life, I can now see the difference between unskillful or unwise action (Everyday/careless) and skillful and wise action (Known/wise). But how we interact and in what direction Conditions Arising will take us is a matter of free will and choice.
A weed, for example, comes about from rain, sun, earth, grass elements and thrives in the right season; the action energy of many influences mix to make

a continuing expression of life. Take away any one element or influence and that experience and potential as a weed ceases. The weed has no awareness to take control of its life but, fortunately, we have understanding.

In one of the most illustrative and penetrating similes in the entire discourses of the Pali Canon (SN 12, 23), the many-sided potential of Conditions Arising as well as the release from suffering is compared to rain runoff. This isn't to be confused with the idea of 'cause and effect,' which is like a series of dominos falling over in sequential steps, but each condition and moment is unique potential unto itself. Conditions Arising is like drops of rain water (which have their own conditions of air pressure, clouds, climate etc.) falling from the sky then running down a mountainside. Individual drops become rivulets, become streams, become brooks, become rivers, become lakes, and become oceans as many sources thrive and interact together. Cut off the conditions for the flow of water and there is drought and a new set of conditions emerges which could lead to an arid desert atmosphere. It is important to understand that there is no beginning or ending, implying a specific source with an exact cause leading to a one of a kind effect.

Everyday Arising and the Greater Arising



Everyday Arising

Careless (ignorant), habit energies become our motives as we go on to think, talk and do. We conveniently label a situation to fit our limited experiences. Reality is perceived through a 'self' image and everything we do is an attempt to try and fulfill and justify our self portrait. Connecting to the world through the six senses, we crave, become attached and act out of self-interest, giving way to pain, torment, conflict, stress, frustration, misgivings and unhappiness.

You go out to buy a new car. What was the motivation leading you to the choice—prestige for how it will make you feel and look to others, caught up by the lure and promises of some advertisement campaign? The suffering is

the monthly car and insurance payments you get to look forward to. There is the worry too as you go out of your way to pick a parking spot at the far end of the lot not wanting your precious possession dinged or scratched.

The degree you spent years getting at night school, was it to help you earn more money for a better house (but what was wrong with the old home that made you unhappy?), allow you to live a higher consumer life style, get you promoted at work so that you could then give the orders and be at the top of the power heap? You finally get the job, but need a better wardrobe, feel the need to climb the social ladder and impress others. All the money you earn goes to living a higher self-imposed life style.

No matter how innocent, all our 'selfish' actions have results and consequences, ending in unhappiness, problems or stress. Even wanting a good time can be a suffering if it doesn't turn out to be the way we anticipated. Having a deep awareness, patience and caring for the present is how we begin to have wise action.

The Greater Arising—Three Karmas
(Past, Present and Future)



As if one karma wasn't enough, imagine three. Would you be three times as lucky or three times as cursed? I'll take one you say and forget the other two! But penetrating into Conditions Arising we now find other dimensions existing. This is quite a knotted scenario of karma; the past is in the present and the present is in the future and the future then goes on to quickly become the past. By now you are probably shaking or scratching your head, maybe wiping your brow, or doing all three. The Dharma is profound.

Conditions Arising Past—
Carelessness and Motives

Carelessness (Ignorance)
"And what is ignorance [carelessness]? Not knowing stress, not knowing the origination of stress, not knowing the cessation of stress, not knowing the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called ignorance."

Everyday Arising: Life moves in quick spurts as we aren't aware or don't appreciate impermanence. This is living without awareness or understanding. Behind all our compulsiveness, desire, anger and confusion dominate us. Living on automatic pilot, we are compelled to live, do and become.

Multi-tasking at work is an example of how unnerved we can get. We take shortcuts, which end up costing us in the long run and have to go back and fill in the gaps. We get angry and grumpy. Driving down the street our mind daydreams about a billboard we just passed. We slam on the brakes in time to avoid rear-ending a line of cars at the stoplight. This is carelessness. Exhausted, we arrive at home short tempered. We live unaware and are reactive.

Greater Arising: Charged and kept off balance by the struggle with life, our present experience is dominated by past upheavals. A driving energy of longstanding habits and impulsive reactions is already part of the mix of life. There is a fight for survival, dominance, power and pleasure at this instinctive level.

Ignorant of impermanence and the greater Dharma (the other two insights are the friction and suffering from impermanence and the non-self nature to all life), desires, hatred and confusion are the basic characteristic of our human condition. Before we ever think, say or do, our past is marked by carelessness. Struggling to cope with life, our habit energies become motives going on to condition our actions and influence our future. Not a destiny or fate, the potential habits surface only under the 'right' conditions.

The Buddha went on to break through and have an insight of Four Noble Truths that clarify life for us the way to liberation and peace (Chapter Twelve).

Carelessness (Ignorance) conditions and leads to Motives (Karma) arising

"And what are fabrications [our motives]? These three are fabrications: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, mental fabrications. These are called fabrications."

Everyday Arising: We all know what it is like to have a mind that won't quiet down. The little voice inside our heads then becomes the motives for what we think, speak and do.

Like a magnet pulling us along, habits and impulses make us behave in certain ways and to having a particular disposition. Each of us has his or her annoying and more challenging characteristics. Again this is ignorance or living on automatic pilot.

I have worked with people who have chained-smoke cigarette after cigarette or talked all day long. Within them were compelling motives. For the most part we react unaware of this subtle defining karma which goes on to influence our actions. We experience life through the distractions of our habits (our pasts in the present).

The Greater Arising: As a conscious dynamic, habits formed in the past, go on to transfer (the dominating energy) by way of the 'final' thought of a dying person and to connect with an embryo of a child-to-be. It isn't the identical mind energy that is transferred but the basic habits of desire, anger and confusion are carried over. This habit energy goes on to specifically make a human to be born as a human or more careless actions to link with an animal or less conscious form. Specifically, wise action brings about an agreeable transferred karma experience while unwise action takes one to greater suffering, problems and conflicts.

However, both wise and unwise motives stem from a reaction of ignorance and confusion to impermanence. Wise action seeks pleasure and good standing and unwise action tries to escape the difficulties and hardship. We may not have known better, but the Path to Peace shares other options.

Conditions Arising Present—
Present Moment, 'Self,' Media Contact, Sense Impressions, Feelings, Striving After, Attachment, and Commitment

Motive (Fabrications) conditions and leads to the Present Moment (Consciousness) arising

"And what is consciousness [of the present moment]? These six are classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, intellect-consciousness. This is called consciousness."

Everyday Arising: A constant flow of action has knocked on one of the sense faculties and our awareness turns towards the action—something drifts by our eye, a sound echoes, a scent wafts by, a strong taste, feelings of hot or cold, a thought is imagined. Yet we are too busy to take notice of what is really happening to us.

When crossing the street, we look both ways for the right or 'wise' moment to step off the curb. We should always be aware, but habit energies have us darting between cars, hurried, or just not looking. This is how accidents happen, how we misunderstand things, fight and argue, take things for granted, and manage to get hurt or involved in compromising situations. The present moment is a dream and we are dazed.

Greater Arising:
Consciousness joins with the experience in the present (this is a reaction of habit and not a soul or an individual person) as the stream of conscious mind energy of the dying person is now transferred and continues to be active, uniting with the embryo of an impregnated fetus. Usually it is Weighty or Habitual Karma that is transferred.

While karma is different than physical energy, motives express themselves through the body as a vehicle of communication. All the past habit energies and impulsive reactions carry over and are transferred as a potential in the baby-to-be. How the habit energy characteristics go on to be played out is determined by many situations and also by free will.

The Present Moment (Consciousness) conditions and leads to 'Self' components (Mind/Body) arising

"And what is name-and-form [self]? Feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention: This is called name. The four great elements, and the form dependent on the four great elements: This is called form. This name and this form are called name-and-form."

Everyday Arising: The recipe of 'self' is contacted through our senses and stirs in the mind. Without either of the two ingredients (mind/body) there would be no 'human experience.' Decartes said, "I think therefore I am," but Buddhist insight acknowledges we first make contact through our senses, which stir a thought reaction.

Looking back how an older neighbor girl first showed me how to tie my shoes as a boy, the body and mind work together. This was my first triumphant moment of realized self. We can all remember learning to ride a bike—the mind works in unison with the body to ride the bike. Mind and body make self (as defined through the Five Groups of Self attachment—body, feelings, perception, motives or mental reactions and consciousness.)

Greater Arising: The right time of the mother being fertile, the union of the father's sperm and mother's egg, and the newly transferred conscious energy allow for the pregnancy to be completed. In the microscopic cell of an embryo are all the dynamics for 'self.'

'Self' (Name-and-Form) conditions and leads to the Media Contact (Sense Base) arising

"And what are the six sense base [media]? These six are sense base: the eye-base, the ear-base, the nose-base, the tongue-base, the body-base, the intellect-base. These are called the six sense [media] base."

Everyday Arising: Taking for granted our surroundings, dominated by habit energies and an impulsive nature, compelled by motives, a one-sided image begins to appear. Judging, labeling and discrimination occur as we try to cope with reality. The present moment is twisted and blurs to a 'self' awareness as attachments and expectations are projected from our increasing collecting of personal experiences.

Everyday life is a challenge. Our conscious awareness is shrunk by habits and misunderstandings. Consumed by the fairytale of 'self,' problems and

disappointments are the natural outcome of ego. Possessiveness comes to the forefront. Anger is felt while fear and unhappiness are present.

The Greater Arising: From the beginning, as an embryo the six sense contacts as well as the mind experience a limited awareness. Once born, they continue developing and maturing, stimulating karmic potential within us, separating experience into 'self' and 'other' (subject).

Media (Bases) Contact conditions and leads to Sense Impressions (Sense Contacts) arising

"And what is contact [impressions]? These six are classes of contact: eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, intellect-contact. This is called contact."

Everyday Arising: The senses are the go between with the present, acting independently from one another, absorbing a different facet of reality: eye image, ear vibration, nose scent, tongue flavor, body sensations or mind reflection.

A 'subject' is experienced in the present moment as the 'self' reacts to the moment. The six senses are different here as they go from turning towards the action to actually identifying and labeling through a 'self' reaction.

I have a headache—we feel after rushing around. Look, there's someone I know—we see. Someone's cooking up something good—we acknowledge a scent. A voice calls out—we look back to see if it is for us. A thought of something to do—the mind reacts. The senses become entangled and confused as a personal projection.

Greater Arising: Each sense absorbs an action as it is engaged. It is there function to recognize and interpret. The energy of a nuclear sun brightens our days, sounds reverberate all around us, a smell tingles our nostrils, taste bursts over our tongues, sensations pass over our bodies, thoughts and thinking play on the mind. Each sense contact works separately. Conditioned by the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises; conditioned by the ear and sounds, hearing consciousness arises; conditioned by tongue and delicacy, taste consciousness arises; conditioned by feelings and sensations, feeling consciousness arises; conditioned by mind and thoughts, mental consciousness arises. The particular impression routes the experience while

the consciousness collects to form an understanding. This is how we experience life and the world around us.

Six contacts for the six senses equally thirty-six consciousness potentials in the present moment (there are a total of 108 consciousness potentials for the past, present and the future.).

Sense Impressions (Contact) conditions and leads to Feeling arising

"And what is feeling? These six are classes of feeling: feeling born from eye-contact, feeling born from ear-contact, feeling born from nose-contact, feeling born from tongue-contact, feeling born from body-contact, feeling born from intellect-contact. This is called feeling."

Everyday Arising: Here the present moment is absorbed by our senses and channeled to 'self' consciousness tendencies and potentials. Our habit energies are aroused though not yet discerning the moment or what to fully make of it as the senses impress upon our awareness.

Here we have put in order (or are trying to put in order) the fast lived experiences around us. The sight of a billboard, a siren approaching from behind, an odor we can't recognize, a taste that is refreshing, something touches us and we are startled, a memory flashes to mind.

Greater Arising: Feelings are generated through the senses having received and experiencing a contact or stimulation in the present (there being a cause and leading to an effect of experience). There are three qualities of feelings—pleasant, unpleasant and neutral—arising as a reaction in connection with the six contacts.

While 'self' or the notion of a 'self' have been with us throughout the whole experience as a part of the mind/body union, it is here at the moment of feeling that 'self' emerges to 'react' with the experience. The feeling moment is named and interpreted by the 'self' consciousness as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. It is feeling which goes on to ignite our past habit energies and impulsive reactions as a conditioned motivation.

Feeling conditions and leads to Striving After (Craving) arising

"And what is craving [striving after]? These six are classes of craving: craving for forms, craving for sounds, craving for smells, craving for tastes, craving for tactile sensations, craving for ideas. This is called craving."

Everyday Arising: The moment goes from being recognized to being alive and real to discriminated through 'self.' A visual image becomes ugly or beautiful; sounds are liked or disliked; taste is bitter or sweet; smell is liked or not liked; touch is painful or soothing; our thoughts are agreeable or a nightmare. Judgments and prejudice are projected from our grab bag of personal habits.

That's the ugliest color for a house I've ever seen (sight). It's sure hot today. I feel like taking a nap (feeling). Umm, whatever you're cooking sure smells great (scent). Coffee is bitter today (taste). The neighbor's dog kept me up all night barking (sound). I'd never vote for him (thoughts).

Greater Arising: Like a Pandora's Box of evils and plagues, 'self' is virtually uncontrollable. An instance before as a feeling, the 'self' was a whisper, now it has intensified to a deafening roar as motives erupt to dominate and distract us. The Five Groups of Self Attachment are the embodiment of past willed action coming alive and reacting under the right conditions and influences. We clash with our surroundings from not understanding the Dharma. We crave after life and fulfillment. Here is the actual moment when our motives and karma put us on course to suffering, setting in motion the potential for continuing habit energies.

But within the crucial moment of feeling and thriving there exists the possibility of wise action and understanding, free will and responsibility. Our spiritual practice has slowed us down to have awareness and wise action. Acknowledging the feeling we catch ourselves being on automatic pilot. Here we close the lid to our Pandora's Box of troubles. The past is literally dropped or disengaged, allowing for the karma of unwise energies to stop. This is the penetrating experience of Dharma insight.

Striving After (Craving) conditions and leads to Attachment (Clinging) arising

"And what is clinging [attachment]? These four are clingings: sensuality clinging, view clinging, precept and practice clinging, and doctrine of self clinging. This is called clinging."

Everyday Arising: The delusion of self is a masked denial. Reality can't be right. We know what's best. All or nothing, we are at odds with the moment, stressed and suffering.

We all know the person who has to have the last word while someone else has to stop everything to better suit themselves; another person walks into a room and begins to arrange and move things about; and there is the person who has to take charge and order people around. We all try to manage life in our own way.

Greater Arising: Attachment is similar to thriving but is more an intensification and result from it. The frustration of not getting our way leaves us dissatisfied and unhappy.

There are four types of attachment. Attachment to sense pleasures of enjoyable feelings which arise towards the object of the experience; attachment to views as we cling to opinions and philosophy; attachment to rules and observances through rituals, practices and blindly following them; and the attachment to a separate self as a unique person or immortal soul.

Thriving is putting our hands in the Pandora's Box. Attachment is our coming away with a suffering or problem. You can trace the role of motives and karma through your entire life experience.

Attachment (Clinging) conditions and leads to Commitment (Becoming) arising

"And what is becoming [commitment]? These three are becomings [commitments]: sensual becoming, form [body as 'self'] becoming, and formless [mental] becoming. This is called becoming"

Everyday Arising: Caught up and attached to the sensual side of pleasure and short lived satisfaction; attached to something agreeable or comfortable;

righteous and viewing a situation as wrong or right; and not understanding the non-self nature of life developing from the many Conditions Arising, it is easy to be attached to one-sided, self serving views and notions. Attachment then becomes a nagging problem and leads to suffering. Thinking we are right (even if we are!) we are stubbornly at odds with other people around us. When the moment inevitably changes, we become annoyed. We could just as easily let go, knowing that everything is impermanent, but habits and impulses dominate us. They back us into a corner and the worst part is that we then turn our back on reality. Most people get caught up in sensual attachment, but attachments to political views, philosophy and controversial issues are an attachment, too. Humility is difficult for 'self' to acknowledge.

Greater Arising: Finally the moment of commitment takes place. Motives and intention stirred by feelings have come alive under the right conditions. Here we react and follow our first impulse of dominating habit energies. Commitment is when we decide to take and follow a course of action.

Commitment is like having the right to vote. We can vote and have a legitimate say in our lives and live intelligently or choose not to vote and live carelessly, after-the-fact troubled lives. Usually we decide not to vote (our automatic pilot tendency) and are victims of unfavorable reactions.

Conditions Arising Future—
Action, Suffering and Problems

Commitment (Becoming) conditions and leads to Action (Birth) arising

"And what is birth [action]? Whatever birth, taking birth, descent, coming-to-be, coming-forth, appearance of aggregates, and acquisition of [sense] media of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called birth."

Everyday Arising: Caught up in a flurry of dizzying potential we react to the moment selfishly. We want to get ahead, hold on to what we have or try for more. If you have ever played a board game with adults you will see uncensored, strong self will. A quiet, good-natured person suddenly becomes Napoleon. The current dilemma of road rage during commutes shows peoples' darker side. Attracted to being a certain someone, a person loses control. A good-natured friend of mine went out of control waving a

pistol he had just recently bought. Fears, jealousy, authority, power and outright craziness get the best of us if we aren't aware. By the time action is set in motion it is too late as our habit energies get the best of us. We have become self.

We react unwisely through sensual attachments; or we assume our body to be a 'self' and are attached to the mistakenly 'solid' nature of things not seeing impermanence; intellectual types act out of thought definitions and project a reasoned 'self.' This is the height of 'self' delusion and conceit ("I think therefore I am"). All three actions narrow the present moment to unwise options and careless choices.

Greater Arising: From a simple motivation and casual commitment we now take action ('birth'). Clearly, mind energy comes before the act ('mind is chief' DH 1). The tendency to repeat a past action becomes a steady habit as we live unaware of the deeper karmic energies driving us. Transferred over again and again are our dominant intentions.

Our anger surfaces, desire manifests itself along with fear, doubt and confusion. Ambition is alive. While it may seem easier to give in rather than face a situation, the consequence is our unwise commitment compounded to appear again in the future.

Action (Birth) conditions and leads to Suffering and Problems (Aging and Death) arising

"Now what is aging and death [suffering and problems]? Whatever...weakening of the faculties of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called aging. Whatever deceasing, passing away, breaking up, disappearance, dying, death, completion of time, break up of the aggregates, casting off of the body, interruption in the life faculty of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called death."

Everyday Arising: There is literal aging and death, which challenges all of us, but there are also our personal habits as an Everyday reaction, intensifying our general suffering and problems or making all our moments a potential for 'life, aging and death' suffering. Conditions Arising moves by so quickly that only by first meditating can you see the whole scenario of twisting karmic complications.

'Self' is expressed or born out every moment of the day as we interact and communicate with others. People are filled with worry, anger, and desire. When opposed we butt heads with the other person. Neither is right or wrong. We have only approached the situation from different experiences, personalizing and making each instance an I, me, mine issue. It is our attachment to 'self' which lives and ages and it is our imagined 'self' which dies.

Citta, a lay person, speaking to some monks explained: "…the eye is not the fetter of objects, nor is the object the fetter of the eye. Rather, the desire and craving that arises…that is the fetter. The ear and sounds, the nose and smell, the tongue and tastes, the mind and thoughts are not the fetters, but rather the desire and craving that arises…that is the fetter." SN 4, 280. In other words, the moment isn't the problem but our own motives and self point of view are the problem ('the life, the aging, the death'). Just because we are busy at work, have a load of errands to do doesn't make for the problem or suffering, the moment itself is innocent. We go on to inject self and experience events as a 'life, aging and death' misinterpretation of self.

Greater Arising: Driven by longstanding habit energies, the phantom self torments us. We go from one careless mishap to another and wonder why our life is troubled. A white lie spoken, sexual irresponsibility, an 'innocent' taking of something that isn't ours, over indulging in food and alcohol—all our actions are first generated by our motives. Motives lead us to careless or wise actions. Imagine your motives and actions like striking matches and setting them under people, situations and encounters. While the flame is similar to the spark, the flame starts up and continues on its own to start other flames. It is never the exact same energy that is transferred but is always ignorant and careless. The Dharma has been ignored. Rather than life and death, Dharma awareness is realizing the constant changing nature of moments arising, in transition and playing themselves out without having to be injected and be burdened by a self.

What we do, say and think affects the future. If you had to take a test and neglected studying, in all likelihood you wouldn't pass. If you studied then the chances are that you would pass the test. If you drink and drive there is the chance of killing yourself or harming others on the road. There is no set scenario, but individual responsibility plays a determining role in the direction of our lives. "When things become manifest to the ardent meditating [noble practitioner], all his doubts then vanish since he understands each thing along with its

cause." UD 1, 1. "Blissful is passionlessness in the world, the overcoming of sensual desires; but the abolition of the conceit 'I am'—that is truly the supreme bliss." UD 2, 1. We have more control and say in our lives than we believe.

A mindful practitioner has three moments to catch and stop their carelessness, all occurring in the present moment. The first insight comes just after the habit energy becomes a motive. This is when the urge to act bubbles up to become a 'feeling.' We now have the wise awareness to turn away from our everyday habits.

Our second opportunity to deal with the karma of Conditions Arising is at the split second before our impulse turns into an action at the decision-making instance of 'commitment.' Rather than falling victim again we catch ourselves before we slip on the proverbial banana peel of carelessness. Notice your tendency to react to the script of self.

The third, last-ditch effort comes 'after the fact.' But this awareness is still a minor awakening. We can throw on the brakes and say 'no more.' There may be embarrassment and some apologies needed to be made, but we acknowledge that if we do continue with our unwise action, the situation will worsen as well as the karma carry over into the future hurting ourselves and innocent people. Mickey Mantle, the late baseball great, came forward as he was dying from liver failure to announce to the public and especially young people the shortcomings of drinking and alcohol. This doesn't wipe the slate clean, but puts us in a position of honesty and doing something positive about the future. "Once all ignorance [past] and clinging [present] are extinguished, neither karmically meritorious, nor imperturbable karma formations are produced, and thus no consciousness will spring up again…[the future]" DN 15.

The twelve stages of Conditions Arising play out the cycle of attachments to the Five Groups of Self Attachment—body, feeling, perception, motives/mind reactions and consciousness—that feed the illusion of the role we play as persons.

Life Practice

Slow down. Feel each sense contact as it is touched and tickled to respond. Identifying what you are doing and how you are doing it, glimpses of intuition begin to come together.

Why bother understanding Conditions Arising and karma? Our happiness and peace are at stake. There are other options. We don't have to suffer. Knowing the contributing factors and how suffering comes about means we can do something about it. If understanding weren't possible then there would be no reason to follow this spiritual path. Before we were dubious, wandered aimlessly, but now we have come in contact with the Dharma. Our problems have a solution.

Take any event in your life: an argument today at work or a childhood memory suddenly flashing to mind. Run the experience backwards, you will see how the episodes reveal the sequence of conditions. Everything points to carelessness (ignorance) and our motives (habits as karma) influencing our decision making and emotions in the present moment.

Of course, karma has carried over from many events and episodes as well as many life times, but all that we need to understand and focus on is how our habit energies affect us in the present moment. We can't change the past, we can only learn from it. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path to be detailed next show us how to approach our suffering and problems. The Buddha penetrated deeply into the implications of karma. We, too, are slowly penetrating the Dharma and bringing understanding to our lives. "I do not say that the attainment of profound knowledge comes straight away; on the contrary, it comes by a gradual training, a gradual doing, a gradual practice." MN 1, 479.

But because it is hard to know when we are being careless, redirect your motives at the instance of 'commitment' (becoming). Before committing yourself to think, say or do, acknowledge where your motives are taking you. Feel how you are driven by the compelling conditions of karma. You are wise now. Say 'no' to habit energies.

Apply the same awareness used during your meditation sitting to your actions—awareness, observing and insight. It takes a bit of time to reformat the 'hard drive' of a mind which has been used to seeing and doing things

only out of self serving craving. Go slowly. Realize the Everyday Breath and the Known Breath. Begin to distinguish how motives drive you to act.

Through Conditions Arising, the compelling dynamics and influences of the Dharma are revealed.

Chapter Eleven

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS—
The Middle Way to Penetrating Self and Suffering



"Friends, just as the footprint of any living being that walks can be placed within an elephant's footprint, and so the elephant's footprint is declared the chief of them because of its great size; so too, all wholesome states can be included in the Four Noble Truths. In what four? In the noble truth of suffering, in the noble truth of the origin of suffering, in the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and in the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering." MN 28.

"The Middle Way...avoids both these extremes: giving vision, giving knowledge, it leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana….It is just this Noble Eightfold Path…It is a state without suffering...and it is the right way. Therefore this is a state without conflict." MN 139.

What is Suffering and Why Do We Have Problems?



We sit with the Buddha. A circling breeze runs through the trees. The branches and limbs creak and the leaves rustle as a dry chime. Patterns of white and gold defused sunlight reflect on the Buddha's face and shine in his eyes.

"It is through not discovering, not penetrating, four truths that both you and I have had to travel and trudged through this long round. What four? They are the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. But when these four truths are discovered and penetrated, craving for being is cut off, craving that leads to being is abolished, and there is no renewal of being." (DN 16).

"And what have I taught? 'This is suffering...This is the origination of suffering...This is the cessation of suffering...This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.' This is what I have taught. And why have I taught these things? Because they are connected with the goal, relate to the rudiments of the [spiritual] life, and lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to [Peace]. This is why I have taught them. (SN LVI, 31).

The Buddha looks at us seriously. "Therefore your duty is the contemplation, 'This is suffering...This is the origination of suffering…This is the cessation of suffering...This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.'" (SN LVI,31).

The most revealing and important question we can ask is, 'am I happy?' If the answer is 'no' then our next questions should be, what is making me unhappy? Why am I suffering? What is the problem? But instead what we do is search outside of ourselves for something to fulfill us, asking questions like what will make me happy? What do I want? What do I need? Our reflecting should be directed inward. The 'right question' led the Buddha in the direction to 'awakening' (see Chapter Two for more on the 'right questions') and the same holds true for us.

Living in North America and in much of the modern, industrialized countries, we have every luxury and convenience at our fingertips. Having more, we are encouraged to indulge and satisfy our desires. But underneath our indulgences is an out of control, endless craving for more that approaches panic and keeps us unsettled and endlessly wanting. Distracted while feeling unfulfilled, we are kept busy and off balance. There is an 'incompleteness;' an aching, empty misery to our lives.

"I teach suffering and the end of suffering," the Buddha repeated with a clear mind, over and over again that a misunderstood, pessimistic view of his insights has developed. The Sanskrit word 'dukha' is the most referred to word and subject in all of Buddhism. 'Dukha' has the connotation of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and disappointment. We can best understand suffering as having a problem, being stressed, bothered, and in conflict. Focusing on suffering, the Buddha looked at the true nature of life. A friend of mine teases me that I am a pessimist and I always counter that I am a realist, seeing things for what they are.

Suffering is part of the Threefold Truths of the Dharma: everything being impermanent the potential for suffering already exists in all moments, encounters and is a part of our lives; the inherent friction, suffering and problems which do come about from impermanence as everything changes; and the non-self nature to all life. Stressing suffering, the Buddha is referring to impermanence and the suffering and problems that come about from impermanence as well as how our egos and selfish attitudes go on to complicate matters. We need to be on guard and aware how suffering and problems do creep up on us.

If the world and things were perfect and never changed there would be no sad endings. But things break, accidents do happen, the unexpected occurs, and people we love and hold dear pass on. But the biggest shock of all is

that we ourselves are mortal. Most people don't accept this until they are aged and fall victim to a terminal illness or disease. One well attended lay person at the temple was in a panic when he became sick for short while. He hadn't realized the true meaning of the Dharma.

Behind the impact of impermanence are our acting and reacting through the Five Groups of Self Attachment. We have our physical body of six senses then the other four groups relate to our mental experiences. The natural instinct to crave for comes out as a natural defense mechanism as we cling and are attached to having certain expectations about life. As our self/ego illusion acts out, we are either attracted to the enjoyment of pleasure, which keeps us looking for more, or we are on guard and feel threatened. What stands out is our suffering.

The Buddha summed it all up nicely: ***"Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair are suffering; association with what is not loved is suffering, separation from what is loved is suffering, not getting what is wanted is suffering. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are suffering.***

"And what is the cause by which suffering comes into play? Craving is the cause by which suffering comes into play.

"And what is the result of suffering? There are some cases in which a person overcome with pain, his mind exhausted, grieves, mourns, laments, beats his breast, and becomes bewildered. Or one overcome with pain, his mind exhausted, comes to search outside, 'Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?' I tell you that suffering results either in bewilderment or in search. This is called the result of suffering.

"And what is the cessation of suffering? From the cessation of craving is the cessation of suffering; and just this noble eightfold path—wise understanding, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

"Now when a [practitioner] of the noble ones discerns suffering in this way, the cause by which suffering comes into play in this way, the diversity of suffering in this way, the result of suffering in this way, the cessation of suffering in this way, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of

suffering in this way, then he discerns this penetrative holy life as the cessation of suffering." AN 6, 63.

Our suffering and problems come on three levels: first, the Everyday problems and difficulties we all experience, feel and share in common such as the aches and pains of our bodies, the inconvenience of the commuter grind, the pressure at work, and all the day-to-day travails we go through and put up with as well as the Murphy's Law annoyance of things just not going right.

Second, there exists the suffering and problems brought about by change or the short-term realization that moments, experience and life, no matter how gratifying, are impermanent. The good time we had on a vacation coming to an end, relationships changing or ending; possessions broken, lost or stolen; friends or loved ones no longer with us; the character of change is part of everything giving way to suffering or problems.

And third, is the conditioned suffering highlighted in our own personal lives through the Five Groups of Self Attachment. As everything else is, we too as persons are a combination of conditions and influences, undergoing constant transformation and are impermanent. While careless in the present moment, 'conditions arising' relates to a past karmic inclination which goes on to affect the future. We distance ourselves from the true nature of life and the world through a selfish nature brought about by our craving. These three areas of suffering and problems are connected and show our conflict with impermanence.

"There are these three forms of stressfulness, my friend: the stressfulness of [everyday] pain, the stressfulness of [mental] fabrication, the stressfulness of [impermanence] change. These are the three forms of stressfulness." SN 38, 14.

Four Noble Truths



Characterized by simplicity and candor, the Buddha not only conveys the Truth of our suffering and problems but also the liberation from them. Normally, we take the Truth to be a statement of fact or to be a precise and definite answer as in a math problem. The Truth here has nothing to do with our intellectual wrangling and off-based perceptions. The Four Noble Truths is a dynamic, experienced awareness understood in our present moment actions of body, speech and mind. Already we have distinguished between Everyday and Known experiences, now we will plunge deeper to awaken wisdom in our lives.

Noble signifies the awareness and wisdom brought about by the Truths as they take us from ignorance and carelessness to awareness, insight and to having wisdom. Our once suffering and problematic lives are turned towards understanding and peace. We are transformed by the Truths. Whether there is a Buddha or not, the Four Noble Truths are real and exist, but it takes a Buddha to realize them and to then go on to communicate their profound experience. In most temples and centers the Four Noble Truths are taught first. After all, the Truths were the Buddha's first discourse after his enlightenment. But as the Buddha himself realized and understood the many aspects and dimensions of the Dharma, we have first become familiar with the background details.

The Four Noble Truths carry such importance and are so all encompassing that the Buddha thought of them as elephant prints, containing and holding all other features of the Dharma. The Truths are the Dharma in microcosm: impermanence; the suffering and problems from impermanence; the non-self nature to all things, the Middle Way between self and ego extremes and the Noble Eightfold Path to liberation from suffering; as well as karma; Conditions Arising and on to Nirvana (peace). Many people assume that the Four Truths are an introduction to the Dharma with the higher teachings coming later, but this isn't the case. The entire experience of the Dharma and awakening is defined in the Four Noble Truths. Without the Four Noble

Truths we would always find ourselves overwhelmed by suffering and problems.

It wasn't until the Buddha knew for himself the profound meaning and implications of the Truths that he awakened. For a short time his own spiritual practice had taken him in the wrong direction of severe asceticism and had become a punishment and not a practice of insight and understanding. But a childhood memory at a festival where he sat alone on a sunny day under a roseapple tree, sparked an intuition that he had strayed from a meaningful practice ("But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any super human states, any distinction in knowledge and vision…Then, following on that memory, came the realization:; 'That is the path to enlightenment.'" MN 36). Here he had glimpsed the Middle Way. Some time later, the Buddha bridged the final understanding to wisdom and enlightenment, answering the question on suffering he had set out six years earlier to realize.

Declaring the Four Noble Truths to five fellow practicing ascetics in Varanasi (near present day Benares), India some 2,500 years ago, the Buddha put the 'wheel of the Dharma' (SN 56, 11) into motion and the Truth has continued 'turning' to this present day. The insight of the Four Noble Truths is an invitation of personal discovery, understanding and, ultimately, peace.

But what keeps us from knowing the Truths and freeing ourselves? Desires, anger and confusion—in other words our habits turned to motives or karma is the stumbling block. Like viewing the emperor without any clothes on, there can be some initial discomfort in facing our weaknesses, but it is with the intention of identifying and transforming our less than wise actions.

Therapists I have known mention spending weeks, months and even years in getting their patients to the personal experience of facing their suffering and problems to where the person can honestly admit and look at themselves without fear or resentment. Even I have flinched to view this exposed picture of myself, but I also felt that I was ready and that the Path to Peace following in the footsteps of the Buddha had prepared me for these Four Noble Truths. We are brought to an awareness of penetrating insight—self and ego are our suffering and problem—and the Middle Way to wisdom and peace.

"The Noble Truth of Suffering (dukha) is this: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, association with the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to receive what one desires is suffering -- in brief the five aggregates subject to grasping are suffering.

"The Noble Truth of the Origin (cause) of Suffering is this: It is this craving (striving after) which produces re-becoming (rebirth) accompanied by passionate greed, and finding fresh delight now here, and now there, namely craving for sense pleasure, craving for existence and craving for non-existence (self-annihilation).

"The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very craving, giving it up, relinquishing it, liberating oneself from it, and detaching oneself from it.

"The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering is this: It is the Noble Eightfold Path, and nothing else, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration." SN 56, 11.

The First Noble Truth
(The awareness that self is suffering)



"The Noble Truth of Suffering is this: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, association with the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to receive what one desires is suffering—in brief the five aggregates [self] subject to grasping are suffering.

"'[Self as] Suffering, as an noble truth, is this:' Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the illumination, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before. 'This suffering, as an noble truth, can be diagnosed: 'such was the

vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the illumination, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before. 'This suffering, as an noble truth, has been diagnosed: 'such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the illumination, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before." SN 56, 11.

The Buddha looked at our troubled humanity and wondered why things rarely got any better. Our modern wealth of technology, support and access, has made things easier for more people than at any other time in history. But, ultimately, are we any happier? How do we cope and bring understanding and compassion to our suffering and problems? Believe it or not, as strange as it might seem, suffering is a salvation. How good to learn from our mistakes. There is hope, joy and, finally, understanding ourselves. You are awakening.

During a Dharma talk, one Nun mentioned how we each carry and are overwhelmed by our own personal 'bag' of suffering and problems. I envisioned each of us like an overworked Santa Clause. We need to learn and understand how we contribute and add to that burdensome bag of problems we lug around. What we think of as on the surface as happiness, may in fact be bringing us greater pain and sadness through our attachments. First we must honestly try and understand our suffering and problems. This may not be the glamour you had in mind for a spiritual practice. But a deeper fulfillment, steadiness and ease, and awakening to life is known—our problems as answers.

Here the Buddha is a 'Great Physician,' his ability to clinically diagnose a problem and prescribe an adequate treatment for suffering and problems through the Four Noble Truths: we have awareness that we do have suffering or there is a problem present; understanding the cause and reason of the suffering or problem; know that the suffering and problem are treatable and, finally, transforming the suffering or problem. This is our prescription to keep in mind; a practical wisdom and applies to everything we experience.

Through the First Truth, the Buddha traces our suffering to the mind and the illusion of self that consumes us. The Five Groups of Self Attachment crave and cling to life, an act of desperation on our parts to try and bring control and security to a constantly changing world. Demonstrated is how suffering arises from our own minds as we are at odds with all our experiences. Our

liberation then must be reached through our own minds as we transform our habit energies and the mind energy of karma motivating them. We all begin our spiritual journey at the same point of ignorance and confusion, but now we have gone from Everyday habits to having awareness, to understanding and now to having wisdom.

I know that before the start of my spiritual practice and journey, I thought it was normal to suffer and have problems, and that all my experiences should end in suffering. From there I would get angry, bitter or depressed. But now with the Noble Truth as awareness that suffering and problems are taking place, rather than shrink back at the first inkling of stress, a 'friendly' communication with my upset has emerged. We begin to ask the right questions. Why am I suffering or unhappy? What is going on here?

Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: 'This is the noble truth of suffering [from self]'...'This noble truth of [self] suffering is to be comprehended'...'This noble truth of [self] suffering has been comprehended.' SN 56, 11.

Awareness:
Our direct experience of the First Noble Truth is a turning point in our spiritual practice as we fully realize the suffering brought about by our personalities and actions ("the five aggregates subject to grasping are suffering"), empowers us with insight as well as greater compassion. The Dharma becomes a lens of awareness and practically applies to our lives.

With deep insight, the First Truth directs us to our problem—what is happening, what we are feeling, thinking, saying and doing. If before we were bothered by the slightest inconvenience, now we show patience and understanding in dealing with the moment. Frustration over being late and becoming testy; anger at the way the boss came down on you at work then our taking it out on someone else; a childhood fear getting the better of you, confusion about a decision to make, the unhappiness of not getting your way; desire leading to more desire—awareness of our upset is the first step in doing something about the problem.

Understanding:
Our awareness is keen to pick up on the subtle signals of self. I'm not getting my way. There's a lot of pressure going on at this moment. The

connection between wise action (the Known) and unwise action (the Everyday) is clear. The I, me, mine attitude and identity keeps us at odds ("birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, association with the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to receive what one desires is suffering"). The Four Noble Truths are a profound realization in our lives.

Transforming:
We stop at this moment of self-filled stress and have a good look around—the situation and our suffering. If you happen to be suffering from a memory you identify this. Misunderstanding, you have linked and attached to the memory as self. If someone has spoken rudely, you identify the moment. You wisely ignore the remark or you can politely ask if something is wrong. There is no need to jump into a tit-for-tat attitude. Here you have identified the situation as 'hostile' and have wisely guided the situation to one of honest communication.

Self only knows anger, hostility, greed, deception, is careless and irresponsible. Now you are careful of what you think, say, and do ("Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me…suffering had been comprehended.").

The Second Noble Truth
(Why we suffer—craving from self)



"The Noble Truth of the Origin [cause] of Suffering is this: It is this craving which produces re-becoming [rebirth or transferring of karma energy] accompanied by passionate greed, and finding fresh delight now here, and now there, namely craving for sense pleasure, craving for existence and craving for non-existence [self-annihilation].

"'This is the Noble Truth of the Origin [cause] of Suffering': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before. 'This Origin of Suffering [self

craving] as an noble truth should be eradicated': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before. 'This Origin of suffering [self craving] as an noble truth has been eradicated': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before." SN 56, 11.

The Second Noble Truth reveals that while 'self' attitude is the starting place of suffering, specifically problems have a beginning through our craving, leading to a desire of pleasure, a desire for immortality, or an extreme desire of ignorant views of life.

Here we see ourselves in honest terms as weaknesses and habits are uncovered. This is the Buddha as a doctor, we are after a complete cure of suffering. At times the treatment can be strong, but like with any illness we are made better.

Perversely, there is an attitude that suffering proves just how strong we are. But this accomplishes nothing and reveals no understanding of our dilemma. There would always be more suffering to come along. That isn't much of a future. When the Buddha began his own spiritual journey there was a sense of breaking through the threshold and tolerance of suffering, but he realized he was wrong to be punishing himself. This turned him around to looking deeper. Now we go deeper into your problems. How are your attachments and desires affecting you? What are your self-notions doing to you?

The Sanskrit word 'tanha' means to thirst for, but 'craving' is the word that has come to be used. There is a craving after in our attachment and association with our lives. Confused with craving is 'desire,' but not all desire is bad. We have a desire to understand and better ourselves and end our suffering. We have a desire to meditate. This is good. On the Everyday level of experience craving comes out in a triangle of self promoted desires: the enjoyment and attachment to 'self' and sense pleasures; the desire for a 'self' image to be immortal and perceiving life as unchanging; and the desire or desperation of taking things from the point of view of no self and an attack on self (this is a disguised view and grappling with self!). They aren't totally separate forms of desire but different aspects brought about by the craving after self.

Sensual desire is an appetite without end as we seek out gratification and are attached to thrills and enjoyment, making pleasure a fulfillment of self. We all know how it is to simply rush around from one good time to another, endlessly wanting to feel pleased and entertained. Whenever the sense desire ends or changes we find ourselves lacking, throwing a tantrum or sulking. "If one, longing for sensual pleasure, achieves it, yes, he's enraptured at heart…But if for that person—longing, desiring—the pleasures diminish, he's shattered, as if shot with an arrow." SN 4, 1.

With a 'self' to fulfill, craving for existence is the desire for survival or a 'lust for life.' We identify with the body as the begin-all-and-end-all of our lives—wrinkle creams, face lifts, liposuction and diet pills only mask an insecurity about death. I don't look bad. I mean look at the other people my age. I'm only a few pounds over weight. Nothing that a new wardrobe couldn't fix! We even try to seek eternal comfort in elaborate funerals as we envision heaven or hell awaiting us (some people are having themselves frozen at death in the hopes of a cure down the road!). We turn away and are in denial about sickness and disease, the homeless and poor people because they make us feel uncomfortable. Even wars and conflicts are waged to exert control of self grandeur; a national flag (symbolic of self identification) is enough to send missiles over borders.

Subtle and disguised, we bring the desire of self to our practice, too. I want to get away from it all and feel good. I see how that other person is sitting there. I'm going to out do them. I know what I'm doing. "If this sticky, uncouth craving overcomes you in the world, your sorrows grow like wild grass after rain. If, in the world, you overcome this uncouth craving, hard to escape, sorrows roll off you, like water beads off a lotus." DH 335-336**.**

The cynic who sees nothing good in the world echoes the final drawback of self attachment. They fight and deny self so intensely that they are clinging to a self of hatred, chaos and doom. This is expressed through anti-social behavior and goes as far as suicidal tendencies. There is a perverse glee to their name-calling and philosophical wrangling. The attitude is one of confusion, discomfort, and rejection as they desperately wipe out all life and anything to do with a self.

When you have true awareness and understanding of the threefold insights of the Dharma the cravings from self-desire all evaporate as insubstantial. Everything is impermanent and made up of non-self energies joining

together. Desire is an ignorant and careless reaction from not understanding the Four Noble Truths and selfish conflict.

"Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: 'This is the noble truth of the origination of suffering [self craving]'... 'This noble truth of the origination of suffering [self craving] is to be abandoned'... 'This noble truth of the origination of suffering [self craving] has been abandoned.'" SN 56, 11.

Awareness:
Life is unsettling and underneath our unsettledness is an unhappiness or dissatisfaction ("the origin of suffering is this: it is this craving"). What we take to be as the 'spice' of life, desire keeps us unsettled looking for more. Our spiritual practice has now brought us to a calm awareness of the Second Noble Truth and contact with our habits: sensual desire, craving after life, and the delusion of no self.

Understanding:
Wanting things our way, we crave clinging to our life experiences. This then is our unsettling. But not everything we want is good for us. Understanding the Second Noble Truth, we move to the track of awareness, understanding our experience ("This origin of suffering [self craving] as an noble truth should be eradicated.").

Now we realize that we do have options and choices. While it is craving which conditions and leads us to future problems and the transferring of karma, there is our present moment awareness distinguishing the Everyday and the Known at the crucial instance between 'feeling' and 'craving,' leading us to Wise Action. Not everything is desire and craving.

Transformation:
Feeling as though someone were pushing us off the edge of a gang plank, our habit energy impulses of temptation, doubt and fear prod us on. Our breaths, the tension revealed in our body language and our chattering minds are signals we can choose to ignore or with the Second Noble Truth, realize the desire and the powerful karma leading us astray. We assume responsibility ("This origin of suffering [self craving] as an noble truth has been eradicated.") Was the answer so simple? Our craving has been leading us astray to problems and upset.

At times we may be lured back in by desire and craving, but we know there is a way out. A realization has taken place in us. Listen to your motives, that little voice echoing inside your head, and where it wants to take you. Don't be a push over to habit energies and carelessness, but firmly say 'no.'

The Third Noble Truth
(An end to our suffering, an end to our craving)



"The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering [selfish craving] is this: It is the complete cessation of that very craving, giving it up, relinquishing it, liberating oneself from it, and detaching oneself from it.

"'This is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before. 'This Cessation of suffering, as an noble truth, should be realized': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before. 'This Cessation of suffering, as an noble truth has been realized': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before." SN 56, 11.

The Third Noble Truth leaves no doubt that the Buddha Dharma is a personal, realized experience of fulfillment, shattering any misconception that the Dharma is nothing more than a practice of denial and turning away from the world's woes. We do turn away from ignorant and careless actions to aware and wise actions by stopping our craving. We alone are responsible for our suffering as well as being our own savior.

In Buddhism this is considered a 'lion's roar' of personal insight. We aren't just hopeless victims to always suffer, but appreciating the Dharma (that life and all moments are impermanent and have non-self qualities), we don't get hung up in wanting or needing, expectations about people or situations because we know they will change.

If there weren't deliverance, the Buddha Dharma would be a useless practice of empty words. Paradoxically, our problems are our salvation. This spiritual practice has slowed us down, pointed us in the right direction and brought meaning and understanding to our lives. The long trail of habit energies turned to motives points to the illusion of self and how we crave as a reaction. Stop your self delusion and craving and you will be happy.

The ending of suffering brings us to Nirvana or Peace. This is a 'deathless' or condition free experience compared to the conditions arising in which we find ourselves struggling in now. Detaching from Everyday distractions, our practice is a matter of awareness and release from self to experience wisdom. This is awakening—our problems as answers.

"Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: 'This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering' [selfish craving]... 'This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be directly experienced'... 'This noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been directly experienced.'" SN 56, 11.

Awareness:
Whatever our problem or upset there is a connection to craving as we are attached to expectations and our ego attitude. When things don't go our way we feel ruined. "This Cessation of suffering [selfish craving], as an noble truth, should be realized."

The focus of your life is your practice and your practice is your life. Craving and selfish tendencies are understood, softening as they are exposed. Through a commitment of wise choices and options, habit energies naturally calm down and a patience emerges to deal with ourselves, others and life. There is no blind faith here but an actual lived awareness. Something we have to continually remind ourselves is the possibility of not suffering.

Understanding:
Stop desiring and you stop craving, stop craving and you stop self-attachment, stop self-attachment and you are free. It sounds simple and it is, but we are blinded and consumed by our habits. We can't accept anything

other than our own selfish point of view or allow for anything or anyone to get in our way.

“It is the complete cessation of that very craving, giving it up, relinquishing it, liberating oneself from it, and detaching oneself from it.” The burden of self is like a suit of armor weighing us down. The suffering comes through our anger, jealousy, sexual frustration, or paranoia—all of these are side effects of a selfish craved life.

Transforming:
Our desiring and selfish nature keeps us clenched. When nothing seems to work it is because self and craving got in the way. We lash out and get hopping mad. But if we let go of our selfish attitude, releasing our attachments, problems immediately start to clear up.

“The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very craving, giving it up, relinquishing it, liberating oneself from it, and detaching oneself from it.”

The Fourth Noble Truth
(the Middle Way experience of a clear mind allows for insight to suffering)



“The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering is this: It is the Noble Eightfold Path, and nothing else, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration

“'This is the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of suffering': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before. 'This Path leading to the cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, should be developed': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before. 'This Path leading to the cessation of

suffering, as a noble truth has been developed': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light that arose in me concerning things not heard before." SN 56, 11.

Through all his intense striving, the Buddha had overlooked and discounted the obvious—the Middle Way. Now he turned back to see what he had missed. On one extreme there is the sensuous pleasure of attachment to self and on the other side there is the negating and denial of self and trying to force it away. Both views are a struggling and mistaken attachment to a self view. Missed is the true significance of non-self and the Dharma; a middle point of emptiness, of non-self, that releases all the ties to our self promoted motives and actions.

"Two extremes ought not to be practiced…there is addiction to indulgence of sense-pleasures, which is low, coarse, the way of ordinary people, unworthy, and unprofitable; and there is addiction to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable…Avoiding both these extremes, the [Buddha] has realized the Middle Path; it gives vision, gives knowledge, and leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment and to Nirvana [Peace]." SN LVI, II.

In 1969 humans first stepped on the moon and a flag was placed there in commemoration. Well, we are no different in our own personal lives as we argue, fuss and fight with others and events around us, always trying to wave our own ego flag. But it is this last attachment to self that keeps us from completely penetrating the Dharma. The Middle Way then is to be fully settled and clear minded to pierce through our last attachments to self. The cure is prescribed in the Fourth Noble Truth. No easy task, like a Jack-in-the-box old habits pop up, but the Noble Eightfold Path of the Middle Way guides us to wisdom and liberation. The Buddha went on to say, "the Middle Way...avoids both these extremes: giving vision, giving knowledge, it leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana…It is just this Noble Eightfold Path…It is a state without suffering...and it is the right way. Therefore this is a state without conflict." MN 139.

The Noble Eightfold Path is—

Right Insight:
Wise Understanding
Wise Intention

Right Virtues:
Wise Speech
Wise Action
Wise Livelihood

Right Concentration:
Wise Effort
Wise Awareness
Wise Concentration

'The Discipline' as Buddhist practice is known, has three areas of insight to cultivate—meditation/concentration; virtue/compassion; and understanding/wisdom. Notice that the Noble Eightfold Path (detailed in the next chapter) covers every aspect of life: the intellectual, the ethical, the economic and the psychological, stirring us to insight and wisdom. The Middle Way is the Buddha's prescribed course of treatment for dealing with our suffering and problems.

"Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: 'This is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering'... 'This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed'... 'This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering has been developed.'" SN 56, 11.

Awareness:
We notice that we are off balance by our selfish attitude ("Two extremes ought not to be practiced…addiction to indulgence of sense-pleasures…and there is addiction to self-mortification."). We can fight, cry, have a fit, and be unhappy, or we can have awareness opening to the Middle Way. The picture of self-promoted suffering and our release are now clear.

Understanding:
With our awareness of the Middle Way, we come to the insight that in order to stop our suffering we have to abandon all our self-promoted desires. This isn't nirvana, peace from all selfish craving and desiring, but at least we are headed in the right direction. Here we note how we go from ignorance and distractions to having awareness and understanding.

"Avoiding both these extremes, the [Buddha] has realized the Middle Path; it gives vision, gives knowledge, and leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment and to Nirvana." Now having understanding, we have recognition as the scales come back to center and control, the Middle Way.

Transforming:
As we go from the Everyday breath and carelessness to the Known breath and understanding, the Middle Way is a natural progression as wisdom. Fulfillment of all four aspects of the Four Noble Truths—awareness of suffering and problems through the Five Groups of Self Attachment; craving the catalyst driving our selfish attitude leading to our suffering and problems; bringing an end to our self craving; and the Middle Way clearing away all the confusion, insecurity and indecision we have as 'self'—the end of suffering is the true fulfillment of our lives.

"When my knowledge of seeing things as they really are was quite clear in these three aspects, in these twelve ways, concerning the Four Noble Truths, then I claimed to have realized the matchless, supreme Enlightenment in this world…"

From carelessness to wisdom, the Dharma lens of penetrating awareness has clarified our lives.

Life Practice
First we must honestly try and know where our desires are taking us and how we contribute and add to the burdensome 'bag' of problems we drag around.

Try and ask yourself during the day as you become busy at work or home, "what am I doing…what did I mean by saying that...what is it that I want?" This serves as a reminder to help keep you in touch with your actions, acknowledge your desires and motives. We all-too easily get distracted and see things only from a 'self' point of view. Feel how you are charged with craving. Your chest is tight, blood pressure up, shoulders hunched, head throbbing. If you are feeling anger, it is because there is self-disappointment. If you are feeling lust, it is because there is self-desiring. If you are feeling sad or depressed, it is because there have been self-expectations.

Our moods change from one moment to the next. Feel how craving leads you around all day long. You try to please one person, argue with another personality, or are accepting of some people. Most of life's situations are imagined and colored by our naive perceptions and expectations. Craving is in the background and we are like a puppet on a string.

The Buddha regularly advised people on the virtues of the Middle Way ("Overstriving leads to agitations, and understriving leads to slackness. Therefore resolve upon evenness of energy, acquire evenness of the spiritual faculties, and take that as your sign." AN 6, 55.). The Four Noble Truths are the essence of a balanced, unhurried, clear knowing life. They transform suffering into personal realization.

The defining moment of our spiritual practice is to be able to come to terms with our suffering and problems—to have wisdom. This can only be reached through the Middle Way. The sum of our long journey has been to bring us to this moment of understanding the Dharma; we can be free from the phantom of self.

Experiencing the Four Noble Truths is to know happiness and have insight.

Chapter Twelve

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH—
The Middle Way From Carelessness to Wisdom



"…I saw an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by the Wisely Self-awakened Ones of former times. And what is that ancient path, that ancient road, traveled by the Wisely Self-awakened Ones of former times? Just this Noble Eightfold Path: Wise Understanding, Wise Intention, Wise Speech, Wise Action, Wise Livelihood, Wise Effort, Wise Awareness, Wise Concentration…I followed that path. Following it, I came to direct knowledge of birth...becoming...clinging...craving...feeling...contact...the six sense media...name-and-form... [self] consciousness, direct knowledge

of the origination of consciousness, direct knowledge of the cessation of consciousness, direct knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of consciousness. I followed that path." SN 12, 65.

In the Direction of Wisdom



We have followed the Buddha over trails, across fields, around rivers and down slopes. We have rested in the shade of trees where he has spoken to us. Now before us is a great open expanse of green and gold wild grass. The grass is tussled by the wind, sections swaying then falling motionless as the breeze moves across. What had been a narrow path now opens to a wide, red-earth lane. The remainder of the way is straight to the far Western horizon. Looking at the countryside, the Buddha begins to speak.

"Before my Awakening, when I was just an unawakened Bodhisattva, the realization came to me: How this world has fallen on difficulty! It is born, it ages, it dies, it falls away and re-arises, but it does not discern the escape from this suffering, from this aging and death. When will it discern the escape from this suffering, from this aging and death?" SN 12, 65.

The Buddha pauses, staring straight ahead. We look at him and see that he is deep in thought. He surveys the landscape.

"Ignorance is the leader in the attainment of unskillful qualities, followed by lack of conscience and lack of concern. In an unknowledgeable person, immersed in ignorance, wrong understanding arises. In one of wrong understanding, wrong intention arises. In one of wrong intention, wrong speech...In one of wrong speech, wrong action...In one of wrong action, wrong livelihood...In one of wrong livelihood, wrong effort...In one of wrong effort, wrong awareness...In one of wrong awareness, wrong concentration arises.

"Clear knowing is the leader in the attainment of skillful qualities, followed by conscience and concern. In a knowledgeable person, immersed in clear knowing, Wise Understanding arises. In one of Wise Understanding, Wise Intention arises. In one of Wise Intention, Wise Speech...In one of Wise Speech, Wise Action...In one of Wise Action, Wise Livelihood...In one of Wise Livelihood, Wise Effort...In one of Wise Effort, Wise Awareness...In one of Wise Awareness, Wise Concentration arises. SN 154, 1.

"Knowing that directly, I have revealed it to monks, nuns, male lay followers and female lay followers, so that this holy life has become powerful, rich, detailed, well-populated, wide-spread, proclaimed among celestial and human beings." SN 12, 65.

He takes one step forward onto the widening path. He waits for us to follow. Now we stand side-by-side with the Buddha. He turns his head to us and smiles. Together we begin walking the Middle Way, the Noble Eightfold Path to Peace.

Each step along the way on the Path to Peace has brought us one step closer to fulfillment. Looking over our spiritual practice, a regime of virtue in the form of wise action, concentration in the form of meditation and understanding the Dharma has been offered. Now all three fronts join to focus as insight through the Middle Way. The Eightfold Path is the bridge to crossing over to wisdom. There is no returning to our old 'self.' We are bound towards liberation. Peace isn't far away.

"Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way this Doctrine and Discipline has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to gnosis only after a long stretch. The fact that this Doctrine and Discipline has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to gnosis only after a long stretch: This is the first amazing and astounding fact about this Doctrine and Discipline that, as they see it again and again, has the [practitioner] greatly pleased with the Doctrine and Discipline." UD 5, 5.

Right Insight
(Wise Understanding and Wise Intention)



The Buddha places Wise Understanding first to turn our attention towards the awareness of selfishness as well as to the Dharma in context to our lives.

With Wise Intention we are determined to move beyond Everyday torments to wisdom. We 'renounce' carelessness (ignorance) which gives way to self craving and to problems and penetrate self illusion to the greater dimensions of the Dharma.

Wise Understanding

"And what is Wise Understanding? It is the knowledge of suffering, the knowledge of the origin of suffering, the knowledge of the cessation of suffering, and the knowledge of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called Wise Understanding." SN 155, 8.

Thoughts and feelings crop up all day long. You can't stop them, but you can understand them and wisely relate to them. Our spiritual practice isn't about living in seclusion but, rather, living honestly and intelligently. The Path to Peace isn't philosophy but coming to terms with the true nature of our lives.

What has been taking place from the day that we were born, and throughout our lives, is that we have learned and been conditioned, trying to conform things to our limited experiences. We actually have Wrong Understanding. What, me wrong? I understand. You're wrong! Well, look again. We see things unclearly and only in relationship to ourselves. But cultivating Wise Understanding, we begin to recognize craving and our struggling. Mentally note and follow the impulses that arise and lead you to like, hate, fear, fight, anger, and crave after. Catch yourself in the act of being you.

Ever so slowly the 'big' picture starts to emerge. You can't expect what has taken so many years, and countless ingrained habits, to suddenly disappear overnight. Wise Understanding opens the connection to our past frustrations and problems through our awareness. This realization is like a camera ever so slowly coming into focus as more and more of the picture of our lives becomes clearer. Appreciation of the Four Noble Truths stands out—self and a self-view are suffering.

You might assume that all this leads to one-sided 'right and wrong' answers, but this is missing a subtle and very important insight. The Middle Way can only be known by a deeply settled practitioner who has gone beyond the manipulation of self. "When a [practitioner] understands what is karmically unwholesome, and the root of unwholesome karma, what is karmically wholesome, and the root of wholesome karma, then he has Wise Understanding." (MN 9).

Wise Intention

"And what is Wise Intention? The thought of renunciation, the thought of non ill-will, the thought of harmlessness. This is called Wise Intention…" SN 155, 8.

The Four Noble Truths have exposed how self and craving undermine our experience. If before we were angry or confused through our self-limited understanding and narrow perceptions, now Wise Intention is our purpose directing us on the Path to Peace to deeper realizations. Wise Intention is like breaking out of the shell of self desire, anger and confusion. ("In this generation given over to ignorance enclosed in an egg of ignorance, sealed in by ignorance, I alone in the world have discovered the supreme full enlightenment by piercing the shell of ignorance." AN 8, 11).

Two thoughts persist over and over again—craving and our wanting to be happy. We mistakenly join the two thinking that they are one and the same. Both are Everyday fulfillments. Craving is the mask of self and has no end, leaving us exhausted and miserable. Wanting to be happy is a reaction to the impermanence of the world and the change that is a part of all situations. As long as our stomachs are full then we are happy. This is living without insight.

Wise intention has three levels of awareness: the intention of renunciation, the intention of goodwill, and the intention of non-harming. Desire, hatred, and aggression are transformed as a mindful attitude of 'non-conflict' and kindness is cultivated. Our intention is to understand, reverse and stop our self centered attitude.

The Intention of Renunciation

Renunciation is a strong word, but here we only renounce those thoughts and motives which aren't useful in our lives or don't promote understanding. When mindful of karma we simply are aware of our thoughts and where they might be taking us. Wise intention establishes a deeper commitment to actively participate in directing our understanding. The Middle Way is the most important understanding to changing the tide of our habits.

I am asked at what point I decided to commit to the Dharma and Buddhism. Well, my commitment was immediate though the understanding gradual. I mention how I was guided away from carelessness, opening to generosity and to having patience to now having some understanding and insight. I have a long ways to go, but I know that I am headed in the right direction—a Wise direction.

People assume that renunciation is giving up everything but this isn't accurate. We are only giving up suffering—self promoted desire. We stop our habit energies and impulsive reactions. We give up the craving that continues us on the downhill slide. We give up our bad tempers, greed, anger and delusion. We don't give up kindness, sharing and awareness. Knowing and understanding the Dharma is the 'awakening' that the Buddha presents to transcending suffering and having wisdom.

The Intention of Goodwill

Since no two thoughts can exist in the mind at the same instance, the intention of goodwill pushes aside cruel and hostile intentions. Rather than seeing the world as puzzling and a threat, goodwill is an awareness, which allows us to see the deeper implications of the Dharma. If you have ever turned on a garden hose before taking hold of it, the nozzle spins around spraying water in every direction. Having anger and rage is the same as a nozzle flying about out of control. But the Middle Way takes us out from blind anger, softening the mind to the awareness and intention of goodwill.

Goodwill is cultivated and practiced through loving-kindness and the Immeasurables (see the next chapter on Insight Meditation). Before it was an 'eye for an eye'—shouting matches, tearful scenes, and harsh words—but now we express ourselves through insight rather than habit.

On the deeper level of understanding karma, the hostility we generate only keeps us bound to cycles of repeated conflict without an end in sight. Rather than leap into an argument, we patiently listen to the other person. Even our body language is reassuring and at ease. We see the suffering in other people and sympathize with them. We started our journey in ignorance and have slowly come to wisdom.

The Intention of Non-harming

Goodwill naturally brings us to the intention of non-harming. Previously, we divided things into 'me' and 'them,' but now all beings and creatures are appreciated and respected as equals. We all deal with suffering and problems on one level or another. Here the Four Noble Truths to understanding suffering burst the bubble of ego that has kept us judging and at a distance. One well educated man I knew had the sad habit of jumping up and immediately killing any bug or insect that went by. He wasn't afraid of them but saw them as inferior. Needless to say, he was a very lonely and isolated man in his own personal relationships.

We see everyone in relationship to the Dharma. Some people are overwhelmed not having the skill or insight to better handle their problems. Other people are less suffered because they wisely approach their situations. In the end each person is responsible for his or her actions and how they come to live their life. We can't solve or take on the problems of others, but we can sympathize with them and have compassion, sharing whatever understanding and wisdom you have.

Here is how the Buddha approached Wise Intention: ***"Before my self-awakening, when I was still just an unawakened Bodhisattva, the thought occurred to me: 'Why don't I keep dividing my thinking into two sorts?' So I made thinking imbued with sensuality, thinking imbued with ill will, and thinking imbued with harmfulness one sort, and thinking imbued with renunciation, thinking imbued with non-ill will, and thinking imbued with harmlessness another sort…I discerned that 'Thinking imbued with sensuality has arisen in me; and that leads to my own affliction or to the***

affliction of others or to the affliction of both. It obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, and does not lead to nirvana.'…And as I remained thus heedful, ardent, and resolute, thinking imbued with renunciation arose. I discerned that 'Thinking imbued with renunciation has arisen in me; and that leads neither to my own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor to the affliction of both. It fosters discernment, promotes lack of vexation, and leads to nirvana…Whatever a [practitioner] keeps pursuing with his thinking and pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness." MN 19.

The starting place is always the same—our awareness and understanding of the present. Our intentions make the moment an insight or a dilemma.

Right Virtue
(Wise Speech, Wise Action, Wise Livelihood)



The mind is where insight takes place and where our intention is scripted, but it is through our actions that our awakening is lived and exercised. Not an ethical practice, Right Virtue is a knowledge of communication and action. Yes, the proverbial foot gets stuck in our mouth as we find ourselves cornered by our careless ways, but with Right Virtue we begin to see how the wisdom behind our actions takes us from self promoted conflicts to fulfillment and how the insight of the Dharma liberates our lives.

Wise Speech
"And what is Wise Speech? Refraining from lying, refraining from slander, refraining from harsh speech, refraining from frivolous speech. This is called Wise Speech." SN 155, 8

"Words that have four qualities are well-spoken, not ill-spoken, faultless, not blamed by the wise…Concerning this, one speaks words that are beautiful, not ugly; one speaks words that are Wise, not wrong; one speaks

words that are kind, not cruel; one speaks words that are truthful, not false." AN 1, 249.

Speech is our verbal contract, commitment and appraisal, reflecting our values. What we say is how we in turn are judged and dealt with. Careless speech hurts others, creates enemies, is the cause for many families not speaking for years, and even the start of wars. But speech can be wise, heal divisions, and create goodwill and offer insight. The Buddha brought countless persons to the direct experience of 'awakening' through speech.

While our speech is all important for the four obvious reasons of not lying, not to slander, not to insult, nor to engage in trivial speech, our speech is used as a wise understanding and intention to not contribute or take part in suffering actions. Everyday speech keeps us tied up in knots. How can you have deeper understanding and commitment when you are lying or saying harmful things that compromise your life?

When desiring, lies are spoken to get our way. When we hate, we speak with the intention to hurt others and to be cruel. When we are confused, we exaggerate, are impulsive, tell white lies and invent things as an amusement. The Buddha spoke seriously to his own son, "Do you see, Rahula, how this bowl has been turned upside down? In the same way one who tells a deliberate lie turns his spiritual achievements upside down and becomes incapable of progress." MN 61.

Behind our speech are our motives; the mind's inner dialogue sound off. Unfortunately, words and conversations all too often jump out of our mouths. Words which are angry, unkind, spiteful, vindictive, cruel, sexually distasteful, or prejudiced cause upset in our lives and in the lives of others. Words cause more pain and harm than our physical actions. It is important to truly understand where our speech is taking us. Note how your habits taint and blur reality. A thought forms, an opinion is passed and, finally, out comes speech, reflecting our whole misunderstood thinking process.

Our every word should be treasured. This is how important the Buddha saw speech. Should we have nothing nice to say, it is better not to say anything than to hurt or criticize. There is a fine line between being honest and cruel. If we see someone, we don't have to say how awful they look, tell how a hair cut doesn't suit them, nor how we didn't like the dinner served and insult our host. This is Everyday reckless speech connected with ego.

Humor is something necessary in life. A smile, being lighthearted or playful is useful in our stress-filled, hectic times. But without realizing it, humor can actually be vindictive and insulting. This type of humor is actually a hostile attack. Humor that is sarcastic is an escape from responsibility and immature.

Our minds are quick to react and lash out at situations and people. We feel it is our 'right' as an individual to express ourselves. Using Wise Speech directs a situation away from hostility. Rather than engaging in nasty name-calling you allow the other person to speak and then stick to the issues. This is having wisdom.

There are even misunderstandings at temples and monasteries. A well-known incident, the Quarrel at Kosambi (VN 10, 1) occurred during the time of the Buddha between two parties of monks over a minor infraction of the monastic rules. Sides were taken, words exchanged and tempers vented. It all came down to an attachment and an inflexibility of egos. The Buddha tried to settle the dispute but even he was told not to meddle. At this point the Buddha had enough and went to practice on his own for some months in the forest. The lay people were taken back by the attitude of the quarreling monks and cut back in their generosity to them. Finally, elder monks brought a truce to the whole matter and the Buddha was asked to return. Everyone apologized and wisdom prevailed.

We need to apply the brakes on all our impulsive reactions and use, as the Buddha did, 'Noble Silence.' The Buddha's 'Noble Silence' was directed more to questions that had nothing to do with spiritual practice. But we, too, can use 'Noble Silence.' Should we feel the urge to gossip, tell a white lie (a half truth is all lie!) or tell someone off, we need to practice harnessing these urges. We develop complimentary, positive and insightful speech. Consider it like watering seeds. Wherever you go and whomever you deal with, you are nurturing and generating friendship, cultivating seeds of goodwill in others. After a tense conversation, end by wishing the other person well. Should gossiping at the work place be going on, use 'Noble Silence' or point out positive qualities. Should someone confront you or insult you, don't say anything to escalate the situation. What good will come from it? This is having wisdom and Wise Speech. Look at it only as a difference of opinion or a misunderstanding, the other person is entitled to their views. How silly

to always charge into battle. At the end of it all, don't hold any hard feelings.

In the end our speech and way of communication is about having awareness and wisdom. We don't harm or betray, talk down to, ridicule, show any animosity or speak badly about or towards anyone else. Speech which heals and generates goodwill is practiced.

Wise Action

"And what is Wise Action? Refraining from taking life, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from sexual misconduct. This is called Wise Action." SN 155, 8.

Non-harming

The Five Wise Actions began with our awareness and are a wake up call to assume responsibility for our life. I know that before my spiritual journey I never imagined that my actions had any real importance or far reaching consequences. The emphasis of the Noble Eightfold Path is about going from ignorance and carelessness to applying understanding and wisdom to our lives.

All life is sacred and worthy, from the tiny ant and mosquito to fish, cows, chickens and everything in between. You wouldn't eat your neighbor would you? Well, we don't eat the other creatures we live and share our planet with. Realized is the suffering behind slaughtering an animal, and that we do have other choices. Just think of how you would like to be treated. You are no less savage than a wild tiger because you eat your meat with a fork and knife.

Seeing ants in the kitchen try cleaning up better. A spider in a dusty corner is welcome to stay. As vegetarians we eat plant life. Vegetables have no consciousness. Our intention is not to harm. We accept rather than see others as a threat or take advantage of their weaknesses.

Non-harming includes not fighting with others. Just because I am a monastic doesn't mean that people treat me specially. Once entering a gas station, I pulled my car up to the pumps. A woman drove up next to me, yelling from her car how she had been waiting in line (I didn't see any other cars when I came in. The station was empty). I immediately offered to pull

out and give her my place. She looked me over, surprised to hear how agreeable I was. Had I snapped back, the situation wouldn't have been settled so amicably. I have been hit, called names, insulted, debased and ridiculed as a monk. Not once have I fought back to injure or insult the other person. I am not a martyr, but an awareness and veneration for all life has stirred in me as well as a peaceful way of communicating ("To be a disciple of the Buddha you must utter no unkind words. You must always be compassionate." MN 21). I always ask myself how I would like to be treated and base my actions accordingly.

The Buddha had assassination attempts made on his life and didn't flinch from any of them. He was often jeered, insulted and mocked. He calmly and patiently dealt with everyone. We refrain from killing, but also from harming and ill-will, understanding how our thoughts and speech translate into action. Goodwill is a part of our nature, too. It is only that our nobility has been dormant or asleep.

Shariputra, one of the Buddha's senior disciples, was struck from behind and knocked to the ground to see if he could be provoked. He picked himself up and without looking continued on his way. The people turned against the perpetrator for his action and Shariputra had to intervene to stop the mob from lynching the man

Not Stealing

Most people are honest. Stealing or taking something that isn't ours is understood as wrong. We don't trust people who steal and their actions make them outcasts. Yet at the work place making long distance phone calls, photo copies for personal use, walking away with pens, pencils, paper clips or postage stamps goes on. Because the company has no 'face' or identity we think it is all right to take. But what we end up doing is cheating ourselves by lying, making believe and living a delusion. How can we honestly come to have understanding and wisdom when we bend the rules?

For many people, giving doesn't come easy. Possessiveness and attachment get the better of them. One woman I know spent more money flying to collect a jacket from her estranged husband because it was 'mine' than the actual value of the garment. That is how attached many people are to their possessions. Others talk about giving closets full of items to the local thrift store but can't bring themselves to part with their junk. In our consumer

culture it is easy to be attached to the material side of life—self and ego creep in to dominate and corrupt our consciousness.

One hard-edged man wondered why I was generous and compassionate. I asked if he knew why. He didn't. I told him he should think about it. Of course, he went on with his resentful ways, keeping the world at a distance. On another occasion I was walking with a friend. A man with a cane and serious limp asked for money. I gave him all the change I had in my pocket. My friend said why did I give to the man when I didn't know him. He asked me and needed it, I answered. Outside from the temple where I ordained a homeless family stopped their loaded-with-possessions car each morning to drop off their daughter at school. I gave them food and money. Later they saved enough money to get an old recreational vehicle to live in.

"If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift. But because beings do not know, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they eat without having given. The stain of selfishness overcomes their minds." IT 26.

Feel how your self-attachment smothers you and how you actually are made miserable when you hold back and are selfish. Stress and tension infect your generous side and embitter your life. You can't hide from your miserly intention. When you are stingy, you make yourself depressed, ill and lonely. Sharing and giving naturally open wide your understanding.

Sexual Responsibility

As humans we thrive as a society. There is friendship, caring, goodwill and generosity. But more harm and victimization is committed by the confused intention that lust is love, that passion is compassion than any other aspect of human nature.

Sex is a physical passion, a carnal falling together. Compassion is an acceptance and befriending. For many it is all right to cheat on a mate just as long as the other person doesn't know, or to go from one bed and romance to the next, in denial of our insecurities and our individual responsibility. Recognize the urges and desires for what they are. This isn't love, or the answer to your problems or frustrations.

I know people who go from one abusive relationship to the next craving love, others who go to little known parks or public restrooms for anonymous encounters. Sexual scandals destroy church congregations. Politicians resign from office over extra marital affairs. Child molestation continues by adults who abuse their 'authority' and coerce youths, traumatizing the victims with life-long psychological nightmares. Teen pregnancies are on the rise. Pornography is only the disguised torment of unloved and confused people.

When there is no honest or genuine dialogue, the already weak relationship will in all likelihood come to a sad ending as the habit energies of both parties involved destroy the affair. Jealousy, petty power struggles, craving for other people, cruelty carrying over from childhood, all of these reflect our weaker, Everyday tendencies. While it is always the hope that the love will be stronger and smooth out the rough edges, the truth is that this rarely happens and most people continue without truly knowing why, suffering through painful episodes.

Here now the Four Noble Truths stand out as to why we suffer. Craving covers up and masks family abuse, insecurity and immaturity. How do we solve or help improve our situation? Slowing down, taking the time to wisely think things over. A charming smile doesn't always mean that the person is sincere. Know that you are infatuated about some aspects of the other person's character but what about the whole person—are they honest, faithful, and responsible?

Wise Action makes us accountable and we look for honest and fulfilling friendships and mature relationships.

Wise Livelihood

"And what is right livelihood? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood: This is called right livelihood." SN 155, 8

Wise Livelihood is working and earning our living in a fair, servicing and responsible way.

Most people have a strong identification with their jobs as pride usually shows when someone speaks about their employment and what their work

entails. Our work place is almost like an extended family. We have some of our most meaningful relationships on the job. Work provides security and balance to people's lives.

Every job extends itself beyond its isolated duties and description. A schoolteacher is the backbone of society as they literally educate the nation and have a lasting influence on many lives. Who hasn't been inspired by a special teacher and guided into a meaningful direction? Doctors, nurses, firemen and paramedics literally save lives. The farmer feeds the world. A musician or any other artist brings joy through their creativity. A secretary in a large corporation is as important as the final product. A street cleaner helps shape and clean the environment and is as is important as a Nobel Laureate. We are all indebted to the work of others. But what about jobs and careers which actually hurt society?

It is one thing to work in a union for worker's rights, it is something else to accept payoffs or get kickbacks. It is one thing to be a pharmacist, it is another to sell the drugs illegally. It is one thing to be a politician and serve your constituency well and another to get 'favors' for passing convenient laws. It is one thing to work for a clothing manufacturer and another to steal and sell items on the side.

Drug dealing not only harms the person using the drugs, who may then have to go on to steal and rob innocent people for drug money, but how does it affect that person's loved ones and family? Taking drugs as a recreational user may seem innocent, but this displays a cover-up of personal problems and emotional issues. Weekly tabloid journals deal in gossip, innuendo, and lies. What are television action series saying about our society, which shoots and kills? Where do all the scandal and talk shows lead us, and what base emotions do they stimulate and glorify?

Pornography makes victims of young people in the skin trade (also victims of those who promote and make profits for continuing and perpetuating the sex scene) and goes on to affect marriages and personal relationships. The minds of youngsters is polluted by X-rated material in magazines, videos, and now readily available on the internet. Prostitution and strip clubs degrade women. Guns and weapons kill children, from the accidentally picked-up pistol found in the home to the murders in our public schools. Tobacco pollutes our bodies. What about military arms deals which contribute to revolutions and military coups being commonplace, and

terrorist acts exploding internationally? Whatever happened to communication, diplomacy and peace-making efforts? The innocent men, women and children of each country caught up in the ideology between dictators and revolutionaries are the one's who suffer.

For most people a job well done brings satisfaction but for others profits, outdoing the competition and generating higher numbers than last quarter leads to a mentality of crushing and outdoing the competition. What we can do is first be responsible for ourselves, then to go on as a society to examine our motives and the direction our country is headed.

The proof of our spiritual practice is bringing Wise Speech, Action and Livelihood together as a realization to every aspect of our lives.

Right Concentration
(Wise Effort, Wise Awareness, Wise Concentration)



Now the Noble Eightfold Path joins together as a climax of experience in the form of a personal penetrating insight—wisdom of the Dharma, wisdom of our lives and liberation from self. All along self has been the thorn in our side. A final clarification comes into focus as we apply Wise Concentration, opening the door to the realization of Wisdom.

Wise Effort

"And what is Wise Effort? Here [one] arouses his will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts his mind and strives to prevent the arising of unarisen even unwholesome mental states. He rouses his will...and strives to overcome evil unwholesome mental states that have arisen. He rouses his will...and strives to produce unarisen wholesome mental states. He rouses his will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts his mind and strives

to maintain wholesome mental states that have arisen, not to let them fade away, to bring them to greater growth, to the full perfection of development. This is called Wise Effort." SN 155, 8.

The Path to Peace requires our effort. Before we were careless, but now over time we have become aware of our action. Intention and effort seem very much alike and there are areas where they overlap, but while intention calls upon and directs the mind, effort is the actual energy and action of a wisely directed mind. Effort is needed to bring us to wisdom.

Wise Effort is applied in four helpful ways: to **prevent** and **abandon** suffering and problematic unwise thoughts, and to **arouse** and **maintain** wise thoughts.

To prevent the arising of unwholesome thoughts which haven't come to mind

"Herein the [practitioner] rouses his will to avoid the arising of evil, unwholesome states that have not yet arisen; and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives." AN 4, 13.

We can't very well think clearly and be wise if negative and counter productive thoughts are running through our minds. The Monkey Mind can come up at any moment to distract our attention and draw us away from the present moment. Now we 'prevent' these Everyday tendencies, applying a clear and decisive awareness. You can see here how effort leads to concentration and a clear mind, or how just as easily when we aren't mindful, habits and self motives get the better of you.

To abandon unwholesome states which have already come to mind.

"Herein the [practitioner] rouses his will to overcome the evil, unwholesome states that have already arisen and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives." AN 4, 13.

Even in our best of moments self and ego are a distraction wanting to have their way. But what is really happening is that we are no longer seeing things clearly and our concentration is broken. We have to take immediate action to deal with the situation before it leads us into full-fledged suffering or problems. Wise Effort to abandon unwise thoughts is called upon. The Buddha offers ways of dealing with a troubled mind.

"When a [practitioner] is intent on the heightened mind, there are five themes he should attend to at the appropriate times…he should attend to another theme [subject], apart from that one, connected with what is skillful…he should scrutinize the drawbacks of those thoughts…scrutinizing the drawbacks of those thoughts, he should pay no mind and pay no attention to those thoughts…he should attend to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to those thoughts…beating down, constraining, and crushing his mind with his awareness, those evil, unskillful thoughts are abandoned and subside…He has cut down craving, removed the fetter, rightly mastered pride, and made an end of suffering." MN 20.

While every day may not turn out the way we want, we can still do a lot by improving our effort. What happens is that we are caught in a momentary frustration as we get out the door late for work, then stuck in rush hour traffic, on to an extra-demanding morning on the job. We are drained and edgy, ready to crack. Knowing that each event is isolated and different, though challenging, puts events into their true perspective. Most times we can't change people or situations, but within ourselves we can make an effort not to be overwhelmed and see things clearly without self habit energies overtaking us. Don't go with your first impulse and if you do, catch yourself and return to Wise Effort.

To <u>arouse</u> wholesome thoughts which haven't yet come to mind
"Herein the [practitioner] rouses his will to arouse wholesome states that have not yet arisen; and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives." AN 4, 13.

Wise Effort takes us from carelessness and being a victim of our habits to now consciously cultivating awareness of non-self (unattached or empty of self) wisdom and, ultimately, our free nature. Consider it planting seeds of goodwill and good intention. If you still get bothered, you at least have realized it to do something about the situation. That in itself is an accomplishment.

Wise Intention here now overlaps with Wise Effort as we leave behind the Everyday experiences tied to desire, anger and confusion and connect with our Known awareness to have understanding. As an insight leading to wisdom, Wise Effort needs our active and full participation. It isn't enough just to feel good and quiet down the Monkey Mind, but now to push ahead with our effort and practice to step out of self-limiting attitudes. No longer

that puppet on a string toyed by everyday distractions, we see self and defuse it with our wisdom.

To <u>maintain</u> and perfect wholesome states which have already come to mind

"Herein the [practitioner] rouses his will to maintain the wholesome things that have already arisen, and not to allow them to disappear, but to bring them to growth, to maturity, and to the full perfection of development; and he makes effort, stirs up his energy, exerts his mind and strives." AN 4, 13.

Deepening our realizing of non-self (unattached or empty of self) nature, we are detached from habits and impulses. Happy to be released from the careless contract as actors playing out a self and ego script, our motives or karma as effort promotes the deeper understanding and freedom of self. Our effort establishes the wisdom to liberate us from self-craving.

Notice how you want to jump right in and give an opinion and inject self into situations. You first have to understand the impulsiveness towards frustration and impatience which turns you toward anger and desire, and what you can do to nurture patience and caring. This is the Middle Way—insight to the shortcomings of self-craving and realizing the implications of the greater Dharma in our lives. We are no longer carrying around that bag of personal problems. You have to regularly remind yourself to let go of self. Wise Effort is the awareness of our free and happy potential. No one wants to suffer. Give up your attached tendencies and you give up your problems.

Wise Awareness

"And what is Wise Awareness. Here [the practitioner] abides contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world; he abides contemplating feelings as feelings...; he abides contemplating mind as mind...; he abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. This is called Wise Awareness." SN 155, 8.

If you are driving and become distracted or take your eyes off the road, what is likely to happen? You will crash, swerve, or cause an accident. Well, the same applies to our lives. We need to be awake and aware of all our sense

contacts. There are four key areas to help us stay in touch with the present (body, feelings, mind qualities and thoughts) along with three associations of experience (pleasant, unpleasant and neutral). Identifying the moment helps put us in a knowing and 'wise' frame of mind.

Body—the body and our senses are our first contact with the present moment as we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think in connection to an experience. Notice your heart pumping after a workout; the churning of an upset stomach; or what it is like to just sit back and allow your body to relax. We start off knowing where we are, what we are doing and what is happening to us.

Focus, identify and relate to the physical dialogue as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Applying Wise Awareness, we relate to our presence of body as an observer and witness without projecting a sense of self onto the moment.

Feelings—the body has feelings and we note how the senses are impressed, feelings generated, and how we react to the sensations. Busy at work unable to get out to lunch, you are now tired and have a headache; it is your birthday and you treat your self to a massage; a dog runs out in front of the car and you skid to a sudden stop.

Focus, identify and relate to the sensations as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Applying Wise Awareness, we relate to our presence of feelings without any self commentary.

Mind Qualities—we note the qualities of our mind and how we are feeling in the moment. You look up and see a co-worker you are not fond of and a tightness comes over you; the sudden thought of a chore to do has you worried; you day dream about the yearly family vacation to the seaside.

Focus, identify and relate to the mind qualities as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Applying Wise Awareness, we relate to the presence of mind. View the thought as impersonal without injecting the scenario of self into it.

Thoughts—thoughts are reactions to the moment and how clearly we cope with situations and others. We think about what would make us happy; a love affair in the past; we put the phone down angrily after dealing with a difficult person.

We are quick to pass judgments and make sweeping generalizations to like or dislike a moment or person. Applying Wise Awareness, we relate to the presence of thoughts. Thinking doesn't imply that we are the thinker. Having awareness you are unattached.

With Wise Awareness our attention now has the quality of what is referred to as 'bare attention' or insight, expressing the clarity of the Middle Way. There is no I, me, mine attitude that judges or discriminates. Sifting through the excitement and cluttered experiences of feelings and thoughts that normally draw us into Everyday problems, our awareness is 'knowing' and penetrating.

The Buddha clarifies, "And what is Wise Awareness? Herein, a [practitioner] dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings...states of mind in states of mind...phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world…the only way that leads to the attainment of purity, to the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, to the end of pain and grief, to the entering upon the Wise path and the realization of Nirvana." DN 22.

Our long journey of awareness is bringing us to wisdom.

Wise Concentration

"And what is Wise Concentration? Here [one] detached from sense-desires, detached from unwholesome mental states...thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy. And with the subsiding of thinking and pondering, by gaining inner tranquility and oneness of mind...is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with delight and joy. And with the fading away of delight, remaining imperturbable, mindful and clearly aware, he experiences in himself the joy of which Noble Ones say: 'Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness'...and having given up pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. This is called Wise Concentration. And that is called the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering." SN 155, 8.

Wise Concentration brings to consciousness the full harmony of the Middle Way as a penetrating insight of freedom from self. We have equanimity and are settled, released from our longstanding habits.

As the Buddha noted and mentions throughout the discourses, there is 'joy,' 'happiness,' 'rapture,' 'bliss' and 'awakening.' The joy that we come to experience first hand for ourselves is the realization that we aren't feeding, promoting or at the whim of self and ego. We do have a say in our lives. Not everything is suffering when we have conscious awareness of our actions and speech as our thoughts are wise. Looking back, our upset came from our unguarded attention connected to selfish desires as the culprit. Now we are conscious of impermanence and the implications of the Dharma through our breath, body sensations and the stream of consciousness karmic thoughts.

The whole Eightfold Path comes together in a climax of purpose. There is a shift as our meditation and awareness focus together as insight and knowledge. The haze of self-delusion now evaporates. As a conscious experience, Wise Awareness with Wise Concentration reveals the exaggeration of our one-sided ego craving. We have equanimity. Our struggle to try to fight and control the impossible or to have things a certain way, has given way to true understanding. Clear options and choices guide our life experiences.

This, however, doesn't mean we are unfeeling persons, but by being concentrated and centered we no longer have that hasty jack-in-the-box tendency. We breathe a heavy sigh of relief, seeing who we have been, freed of all our attachments and expectations. The wisdom and realization of the Dharma is penetrated through our Everyday breaths and realized by our Known awareness. Our motives determine our direction and outcome as we intelligently guide ourselves. We can't change people, events or history but we can dwell in an even, caring and responsible way. "Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and awareness."

Our Wisdom
(Entering the Stream of Liberation)



Self and ego, habit energies and impulsive reactions, are like a volcano ready to explode and vent at any moment, the careless potential of transferring karma energy and continued suffering and problems existing. On one extreme we have been ignorant and on the other side is our potential for wisdom and liberation, while in between is self and the many guises of habit energies obscuring true Dharma insight. While we may be better off and happy, our experience is incomplete until we have "…cut them [habit energies] off at the root, made them like a palm stump, done away with them so that they are no longer subject to future arising." MN 36.

Dormant Habit Energies

Habit energies can be deceptive like a dormant volcano. We all know what it is like not to be angry, but can we actually stop ourselves from getting angry? Quite a chore. At a temple where I stayed for a few months as a lay person, the monastics there played 'Dharma combat,' or cat and mouse, seeing if they could provoke one another. While I didn't approve of such tactics because they gave over to dominance and one-ups-manship and I thought the time could be better spent, it was still interesting to see how they would try to trip each other up and get the other's ego to come out. Dormant habit energies are there waiting to come out in the form of desire, anger or confusion. Just because you are quiet, in control and your practice is regular doesn't mean that habit energies can't surge to life and produce suffering. This is living in denial.

Conscious Habit Energies

Conscious habit energies are the volcano which has started to steam and show signs of erupting. This is where our dormant energy springs to life and appears in our consciousness as an active thought.

Who hasn't thought of 'killing' an annoying person ('I wish they were dead,' we think to ourselves.), had a sexual fantasy or just let the Monkey Mind run wild? The potential of habit energies is bubbling. Here the habit energy is an obstacle preventing us from having wisdom. Be careful or you just might get what you wish for as thoughts become an inclination. You can be good at not 'showing' any tell-tale signs and seeming calm, but our minds are far from controlled as at any moment a habit energy can still explode.

Active Habit Energies

At the third level, the habit energy passes from consciousness to action. This is where the volcano erupts and out spills unwise thoughts, speech, and actions.

I have known people who have gone off and had flings, costing them their jobs and families; others who have stolen at work and lost their jobs; others who have overdosed on drugs just for a good time and people who have been crippled at the cost of being drunk. This is kind of like people dieting to lose weight and then breaking their diet at some point. Awareness isn't about being right or wrong but going deeper to the wisdom of the Dharma and non-self—carelessness generates suffering and awareness wisely approaches a situation without any ego ambition.

The three areas of insight, virtue and concentration of the Eightfold Path apply directly to the three levels of habit energies (desire, hatred and confusion). With Right Insight we are aware of the dormant energies within us and are always on guard to the possibility of being careless or reckless. Having Right Virtue controls unwise speech and physical actions, preventing habit energies that have surfaced from carrying over to action. Right Virtue acts as a road sign, alerting us to potential problems and upset. With Right Concentration we have the effort, awareness and wisdom to stop unwholesome karma that has arisen and transform it. It is kind of like being awakened from sleep. Some persons wake up easily while others want to sleep a bit longer and others who don't get up at all. Everything comes down to our motives or disposition. No one can do it for us. How long you want to remain 'ignorant' or 'asleep' is up to you.

Wisdom is the cure which the Buddha has all along been guiding us to. Insight comes together as a true deep experience of the Noble Eightfold Path. A deafening realization as an insight of non-self awareness, Wisdom

resounds. Ignorance is squelched. Oh, now I see. Habit energies and self are ignorance. When desires get the better of me I suffer. It's self and attachments that leap up and have me looking in the wrong direction. When I understand I let go of ego. When I don't crave I don't suffer. Yes, I have wisdom.

The Eightfold Path comes together like pinpointed light beams from a magnifying glass, turning into an intense personal realization. This is our first glimpse of wisdom, the wisdom that leads us to Peace. "The [practitioner] dwells in contemplation of phenomena, namely, of the [Five Groups of Self Attachment]. He knows what material form is, how it arises, how it passes away; knows what feeling is, how it arises, how it passes away; knows what perception is, how it arises, how it passes away; knows what mental formations are, how they arise, how they pass away; knows what consciousness is, how it arises, how it passes away." DN 22. As we penetrate wisdom, habit energies, impulsive reactions and our attachments to self fade.

Through the realization of the Eightfold path, we have entered the Stream of Liberation. Our karma energy will never again be transferred to a lower, ignorant state. We are bound for complete liberation in seven or fewer lifetimes.

Of one lay female disciple who had achieved Stream Entry it was said: "…who act fully in accordance with the precepts…who attain inner tranquility of awareness…who reach firm ground in this Doctrine and Discipline, attain a firm foothold, attain consolation, overcome their doubts, dispel their perplexity, reach fearlessness, and gain independence from others with regard to the Teacher's message…" AN 6, 16.

Within Wisdom itself, there are four recognitions of deepening insight: Stream Enterer, Once-Returner, Non-Returner, and Arahant or Noble One. Each of these rights to passage has its 'fruit' of insight and understanding into the release of specific habit energies. Now that ignorance has been exposed (our self habit nature), wisdom is present.

The Stream Enterer has complete confidence in the practice, knowing non-self as well as the short-comings of rituals and ceremonies; the Once-Returner weakens the habits of desire, hatred and confusion; the Non-Returner goes on to end all self promoted desire, hatred and confusion, and

the Arahant or Noble One has a break through of release to the physical and non-physical (mental) worlds, extinguishes the conceit of self, the restlessness and unsettledness of impermanence, and is done with the 'ignorance' or carelessness of not realizing the Dharma. Through these ten deepening wisdoms and realizations the 'knowledge and deliverance' of the Dharma is penetrated to complete liberation and peace.

How to deepen and continue the insights of the Noble Eightfold Path are detailed in the next chapter on Insight Meditation. "Association with people of integrity is a factor of stream entry. Listening to the true Dharma is a factor of stream entry [to liberation]. Appropriate attention is a factor of stream entry. Practice in accordance with the Dharma is a factor of stream entry." SN 55, 5.

Life Practice

If you took a tablet with only one mineral or vitamin in it you would eventually become malnourished, weak or sick. You need all the minerals and vitamins to be 'awakened.' All eight insights of the Eightfold Path contribute to our release. The Middle Way works as a harmony of understanding and experience.

Our self and ego attitudes are an extreme reaction, distancing us from the insight of the Dharma. Everyday associations of desire, hatred and confusion tug at us, but the Eightfold Path is a transforming realization of habits to wisdom. We learn to ask the 'right questions' and see through the shallow reflection of self.

With Wise Intention, we try not to let hateful, jealous, cruel or vengeful thoughts pass through our minds. Take responsibility for what you think. A constructive way to deal with negative and unwise thoughts is to offer a blessing or well wishes to ourselves, to a difficult situation or to the person we hold in contempt. May I be patient. May I feel kindness. I hope you go on and have a nice day. You will discover how much easier things are if you let go without feeling you need to react out of self habits.

Take note of where your speech is taking you. Don't go with your first impulse. Take that extra second to sense the implications and reaction of what it is you are going to say. Make each and every one of your words

valuable and memorable. Feel what it is like not to argue and fight. Apply 'Noble Silence.' Don't feel you always have to have an opinion!

The final proof of our practice is in our actions. Wise Action is about sharing—doing favors, extending yourself, caring and being friendly. Be open and willing. Let people know that you are thinking about them. Be accountable for your actions.

Wise Livelihood should be enjoyable, but we do get tied into jobs we don't like in order to pay the bills. If possible, your job should reflect your ability and character. Some people are good with their hands and make a wonderful seamstress or a handy man. Other people like words and make good writers, lawyers, or office workers. Know your strength and talents and take advantage of them. But whatever you do is important. Society couldn't get along without a single one of us.

When you do something give it your best effort, your Wise Effort. Even small things count. Taking out the garbage, feeding the dog or cat, going through doors from one room to the next—are you on automatic pilot or are you aware of what and how you are doing it? These little acts reveal so much about us, reflecting anger, tension and frustration.

Rather than being easily sidetracked, Wise Awareness is being an awakened and responsible person; to know what you are feeling in body, sensations, mind and thoughts—where are you, what is happening, are you tense or relaxed? Be aware.

Realize how your one-way-street attitude has limited you. Letting go of your standby attachments, you have the understanding of the Middle Way to clarify your life.

From ignorance and carelessness to awareness and understanding—now you have come to know Wisdom.

Chapter Thirteen

INSIGHT MEDITATION—
The Realization of Wisdom



"The carpenter or his apprentice sees on his tool handle the wearing away caused by his fingers and thumb, but he does not necessarily know that so much has been worn away today, so much yesterday and so much at another time. In the same way, one living devoted to the practice of meditation does not know that so much of the defilements [habit energies] has been worn away today, so much yesterday and so much at another time. He merely has the knowledge that they are being worn away." SN 3, 154.

Opening to Insight



There is a slight rise ahead on the path as we follow behind the Buddha. For a moment the sun is in our eyes and we squint. At the top of the rise we look down over the brightness of the countryside. Holding a hand up to shield our eyes, we can see in all directions. Far behind us now is the mountainside where we began our journey, looking more like a shadowy mound. We glance at the Buddha. He stares out at the hazy horizon.

Many conditions and influences have brought us to this place of spiritual awareness. We are no longer the same person at the start of our journey. We have come to understand and experience life in its true dimensions—impermanent and a non-self nature. We are aware—we have awakened. Now we continue on down the other side of the rise and stop to rest.

The Buddha smoothes out his robe, takes a few settling breaths then allows for a moment of silence. "Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a…mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a [meditator]... enters and remains in the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, as inconstant, stressful…painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, non-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena...'This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all [mental] formations; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Nirvana.' " AN 9, 36.

"I have taught the way to cross over the flood by going from one support to the next, the noble liberation. Whatever a teacher should do—seeking the welfare of his disciples, out of sympathy for them—that have I done for you…Practice meditation. Don't be heedless. Don't later fall into regret. This is my message to you all." MN 106.

The Buddha's eyes look down. We sit together meditating.

There are five useful meditation techniques that help bring insight to our lives and deepen our understanding—the Centering Penetrations (Form Jhanas), The Four Foundations of Awareness, the Awareness of Breathing Meditation, the Immeasurables, and the Eminent Penetrations (Formless Jhanas). Actually, there are many other meditations but these five have come to be the mainstay, sharing a non-self awareness of the present moment as their underlying experience of wisdom. You don't have to become an expert in all the meditation practices, but choose the one or two that best suit you. Over the years, I have practiced all of them. Each of them has helped me to detach from self habits as insight has slowly emerged.

For myself I find it a positive way to being the day with a meditation session on the Immeasureables (loving-kindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity), bringing caring to oneself and good will to the world at large. Later in the evening you can focus and settle down with a concentration meditation.

We have already been practicing these meditation techniques but now we develop, expand and cultivate them as useful tools to deeper insight. Think of the meditation offerings as consciousness expanding exercises. Some people jog while others swim, bicycle, take aerobics classes, lift weights or do yoga. There is the 'right' meditation to fit everyone's need, allowing for enjoyment and enriching our direct experience of the Dharma.

Meditation has been around for thousands of years and was well established in India before the Buddha's time. However, the meditations only took the practitioner as far as being deeply settled without revealing any true understanding or insight. This is serenity meditation or just a calming, survival practice. The ultimate question of suffering and fulfillment wasn't addressed or answered. Unique to Buddhism is Insight Meditation or vipassana. Insight is knowing and realizing the true nature of life or the Dharma in ourselves, our surroundings and penetrating to the breakthrough insight of knowing the causes of our suffering and the release as well. An overview and summary of the five core meditations follows. You are encouraged to read the complete discourses for their insights.

The Centering Penetrations of Jhana Practice
(Related to the Everyday perception of forms and sense contacts)



The Joy of Meditation
The Joy of Concentration
The Joy of Equanimity
The Joy of Detachment

In the most beautiful and poetic language of the entire discourses from the Pali Canon, the Buddha eloquently describes and details the Centering Penetrations. From his tone and the words used there is no doubt that the Penetrations have a special place in meditation practice. Here, the Centering Penetrations have been chosen for their simplicity and usefulness as a present minded concentration to lead off the meditation series. Concentration is important in our going on to develop insight in our lives. In the West awareness of the present moment, where we are, what we are doing and feeling has been the emphasis. Awareness connects and grounds us, but concentration has been overlooked. We can be sitting and aware of the Monkey Mind, but that doesn't calm or focus the mind. Simple concentration is elusive. Fortunately, there is a direct, hands-on-approach to the Centering Penetrations.

The word jhana refers to our having penetration or absorption in clear, one-pointed concentration, but the jhanas are also mentioned as 'ecstasies' because of the joy brought about from having a calm and undistracted mind. The happiness is a direct experience as we go from Everyday habits and impulses and being unsettled to being aware and knowing. Practice, concentration, joy and insight go hand-in-hand.

The Centering Penetrations are connected to the 'body' or 'form' ('rupa'), relating to the six senses as well as to their experience. Here what we will be doing is quieting and detaching from the sensory overload which charges our lives. We have eyes and sight, ears and hearing, nose and scent, tongue and taste, touch and feelings, thoughts and consciousness. Practicing the Centering Penetrations is like disconnecting one breaker switch at a time in your home fuse box. The senses and all the Everyday feelings of habit energies driving us are our electrical contact.

If you tried the Awareness Penetrations mentioned earlier in Chapter Five then the Centering Penetrations won't be all together new for you. Initial Contact, Sustained Contact, Interest, Joy and One-Pointedness direct our attention from impulsiveness to the calm awareness of non-self.

The Joy of Meditation (Seclusion)
"…quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, [the meditator] enters upon and abides in the first jhana absorption, which is accompanied by initial and sustained thought, with interest and pleasure born of seclusion." MN 26.

"Just as a skilled bath man…heaps bath powder in a metal basin and, sprinkling it gradually with water… [the meditator] makes the joy and pleasure born of seclusion drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body unprevaded by the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion." MN 39.

"Friend, in the first jhana absorption five distractions [the Monkey Mind] are abandoned and five factors are possessed. Here, when [the meditator] has entered upon the first absorption, sensual desire is abandoned, ill will is abandoned, sloth and torpor are abandoned, restlessness and remorse are abandoned, and doubt is abandoned; and there occur [initial contact, sustained contact, interest, joy, and one-pointedness]." MN 43.

The Joy of Meditation begins with our actually sitting to meditate (the Buddha referred to it as 'seclusion' or coming to sit at a quiet place). This meditative time out and rest from life's ups and downs and demands is a beneficial doing 'nothing' (nothing disturbing or self promoting). We find joy with the stilling and release of our habit energies. Our whole being is soothed and calm.

Identify with the present moment of feelings, sensations and your surroundings. Do a body scan to help you settle down. Take a few deep breaths to relax. Feel yourself as you sit: check your posture, note the different pressures and sensations, how you are feeling in this moment as well as taking in your surroundings of the quiet room or meditation hall.

The Joy of Meditation is a quiet moment. Our senses, which are normally alive and impressed, begin to calm down. Allow joy to come naturally on its

own and to flow over you. There is a weightlessness and a release rather than looking for or trying to achieve something.

The Monkey Mind is weakening but still manages to flare up in occasional chattering instances. Let whatever thoughts spring up to mind but don't actively follow after them. Don't squeeze or bear down on the thought and collapse your awareness around it. Thoughts slowly become wispy and soft. If longstanding difficulties with anger, insecurity or confusion arise, feel how you are clenching and clinging to these issues. Below the level of everyday stress is joy.

The Joy of Meditation has the Five Awareness Penetrations of Initial Contact, Sustained Contact, Interest, Joy and One-pointedness as part of its awareness. Initial contact can begin with your breath or any other subject you would like to focus on. Sustained contact is continuing deepening your attention on the subject, interest is knowing and acknowledging the subject of our attention. Joy is our full awareness of the subject, and one-pointedness is our undistracted concentration.

Feel the subtle qualities of the Joy of Meditation, Initial and Sustained Contact standout as we simply connect with our sitting and ease into the meditative time out. The Penetrations deepen into a joyful, quiet mind as you slowly begin to also experience concentration. The joy experienced is an Everyday pleasure and not an insight.

The Joy of Concentration

"Again, with the stilling of initial and sustained thought, [the meditator] enters upon and abides in the second absorption jhana, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without initial and sustained thought, with interest and pleasure born of concentration." MN 26.

"Just as though there were a lake whose waters welled up from below …[the meditator] makes the rapture and pleasure born of concentration drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure born of concentration." MN 39.

Now settled, there is a shift from the general pleasantness of the body being relaxed and the breath calming giving way to the Joy of Concentration. An

observer rather than occupied, we feel as though we are standing outside and looking in on ourselves.

Feel what a restful mind is as your thinking settles and awareness expands. Thoughts may arise but pass by without attachment. The depth and expanse of the mind is realized—stilled, open and unburdened compared to when we are preoccupied and pressured.

We just don't snap our fingers and become concentrated, but ease into it through interest, joy and one-pointedness of the moment. Sounds can echo around us, sensations may tingle, the Monkey Mind may screech but our attention doesn't rush off to inspect the action. The moment has been one of quieting down and detaching from our sensory perception.

The Joy of Equanimity

"Again, with the fading away as well as rapture, [the meditator] abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third absorption jhana, on account of which noble ones announce: 'He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.'" MN 26.

"Just as, in a pond …some lotuses that are born and grow in the water thrive immersed in the water without rising out of it, and cool water drenches, steeps, fills, and pervades them to their tips and their roots…[the meditator] makes the pleasure divested of rapture drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body unpervaded by the pleasure divested of rapture." MN 39.

Open, calm, and at ease, it feels as though we are floating on a warm sea. Buoyant and effortless, our body and mind are pacified. Interest gives way to Joy and One-pointedness. The breath flows without any starting place and passes effortlessly. Our mind is at rest, further separating from all sense activity. Equanimity is the direct experience brought about by emphasizing concentration in meditation.

Adrift in Equanimity the Interest Penetration gives way to Joy ('rapture') and one-pointedness. The breath, body and mind have softened and relaxed in ways unrealized before. The present moment is centered and quiet. There is a sense of 'wishlessness' as all our needing to be, act and react have

dropped away. As though taking a warm soothing bath, all our sensations and mind activity are relaxed.

The joy of deep, concentrated equanimity gives way to the Joy of Detachment.

The Joy of Detachment (neither pleasure nor pain)
"Again, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, [the meditator]enters upon and abides in the fourth absorption jhana, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity." MN 26.

"He sits pervading this body with a pure bright mind…just as though a man were sitting covered from the head down with a white cloth…and sits pervading this body with a pure bright mind, so that there is no part of his whole body unpervaded by the pure bright mind." MN 39.

Allow yourself to feel and know the depths of your unattached mind as detachment flows over you. It feels as though we have opened a door and entered a room without walls, floor or ceiling. The craving and grasping mind has been unlocked. Our awareness is larger than our own imagination and our connection to self. Awareness shines fully realized. Joy has given way to the one-pointedness of an undistracted mind attention.

The Centering Penetrations are a training tool to see through the commotion of our sense activities.

The Four Foundations of Awareness
(*Satipatthana Sutta* MN 10)



The Discourse on the Four Foundations of Awareness (MN 10) is a practical appreciation of our body, feelings, mind and mental experiences; an awareness leading to deeper insight and understanding of non-self realization. Through the recognition of our breaths—the Everyday Breath and the Known Breath qualities (see Chapter Two), we transcend our suffering and problems.

The Awareness of the Body

"Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out...he trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the entire body and to breathe out sensitive to the entire body…He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily formations, and to breathe out calming bodily formations…Breathing in long, he discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out long, he discerns that he is breathing out long. Or breathing in short, he discerns that he is breathing in short; or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short. He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the entire body and to breathe out sensitive to the entire body…He remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to the body…And he remains [attached] independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world." MN 10.

Our bodies are a part of the Everyday Breath of self perceiving and misconceptions. But the Everyday Breath is a false identification, created by the illusion of self.

The Buddha goes on to speak uncompromisingly about the true nature of the body. Despite its marvelous biology, the body suffers and undergoes the same breakdown that all form and matter does. This sobering portrait is to have us see the true nature of Dharma (the impermanent and non-self dynamics). We, too, arise, transform and dissolve.

Meditation on the Body

Feel the quality of your breath as it maps your physiology, sending impulses through nerve endings, cells, muscles and skeleton. Take notice whether the breath is short or long as it moves on its own. Watch and observe as the breath settles down and the body calms. The diaphragm rises, a spaciousness like a bellows is felt as the breath is inhaled and then is exhaled. The abdomen also lifts and drops with the breath.

Now sense other areas within your body—your facial muscles moving with the breath, throat tickled with air, chest expanding, heart beating, internal organs moving with the abdomen as well as your lower back having a faint pressure, a feeling of dampness or dryness to the skin. Our attention goes from being preoccupied to one of awareness and understanding—the body is not self.

Detachment takes place. The breath and the body work on their own and we mindfully follow their rhythm. The body as a body, the breath as a breath—a meditation of concentrated awareness, impermanence and non-self are realized.

The Buddha goes on to practically detail how to bring awareness to all aspects of our life. **"When walking, the [practitioner] discerns that he is walking. When standing, he discerns that he is standing. When sitting, he discerns that he is sitting. When lying down, he discerns that he is lying down. Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it…Furthermore, when going forward and returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward and looking away... when bending and extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe and his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, and savoring... when urinating and defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert." MN 10.**

Awareness of Feelings

"When feeling a painful feeling, discerns that he is feeling a painful feeling. When feeling a pleasant feeling, he discerns that he is feeling a pleasant feeling. When feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he discerns that he is feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling…In this way he remains focused internally on feelings in and of themselves, or externally on feelings in and of themselves, or both internally and externally on feelings in and of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to feelings, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to feelings, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to feelings…And he remains [unattached] independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world." MN 10.

Feelings or sensations are the way we connect and experience life. The moment is lived as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral as we label the feeling and sense experience. We become endless seekers of pleasure through attachment and gratification, while denying unpleasant moments and tuning out neutral experiences. Sensations and feelings are evidence of the

changing and short-lived nature of life. Trapped by our reactions, the downfall is our attachment to self and ego.

Meditation on feelings and sensations

Direct your awareness to any body feelings you are having. The most obvious feelings during meditation are in the lower back, stomach or abdomen, chest area, and most notably, in the knees and lower legs as well as the buttocks stiffening. Open your awareness to the sensation rather than bearing down to judge. Note the moment and whether the sensation is dull, sharp or passing. Remain with the sensation as an observer, not allowing the ego as critic to dominate.

There are pleasant feelings of a full stomach, when we have energy for our meditation or other times we can be tired and listless. Feel how much more vibrant and clearer your attention is when you do have energy. But when you are drained, every itch, or tingling makes the meditation seem like sitting on a cushion of nails. Don't get sidetracked by habit energies to fight with your feelings. Allow the sensation to pass. Recognize the Dharma. Sensations are impermanent. There is no ego within or behind the sensations. Open up to non-self.

Expand your awareness to appreciate what it is like not to have any outstanding feelings. We tend to be aroused and take for granted neutral moments.

Unattached, the meditation is an experience and an understanding. We follow the rhythm of sensations without making it an I, me, mine issue. The feeling as a feeling without self, the sensation as a sensation—a meditation of concentrated awareness, impermanence and non-self are realized.

The Awareness of the Mind

"When the mind has passion, he discerns that the mind has passion. When the mind is without passion, he discerns that the mind is without passion. When the mind has aversion, he discerns that the mind has aversion. When the mind is without aversion, he discerns that the mind is without aversion. When the mind has delusion, he discerns that the mind has delusion. When the mind is without delusion, he discerns that the mind is without delusion…he remains focused internally on the mind in and of itself, or externally on the mind in and of itself, or both internally and

externally on the mind in and of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the mind, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the mind, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to the mind…And he remains [unattached] independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world." MN 10.

Moments flash by in dizzying sequences. Life is unclear and misinterpreted. Our understanding is regularly fooled and betrayed. The self wants to stamp its approval, but all that is needed is that we observe and understand. Become aware of how consciousness arises through contact with the senses of eye, ear, nose, taste, touch or thoughts. Often we are overwhelmed by our attitudes: blinded by anger, swept up in desire or are scared and in denial. Simply note the qualities and presence of the aware and open mind.

Meditation on the Mind:
Check in with yourself. How are you today? What are you feeling? Listen to yourself. I'm not happy. I don't like this. I'm confused, angry or scared. No one is ease dropping so you can feel free to have an open conversation. You will still have your secrets, just not from yourself!

There is a dialogue going on within us: breath, body and mind overlapping and communicating in subtle ways. In this instance direct your awareness to your mind. Does your mind feel open and receptive? Is your attention drifting or steady? The mind is like the ocean. On the surface things can be choppy as our attachment to habit energies sweeps by and Everyday distractions consume us. But below the surface the mind is deep, vast and expansive, having the awareness of wisdom. Guide your insight to notice how you grasp and cling through a self-attitude to be at odds with a situation.

Strong motives and intentions are at work within us. Try bringing your awareness to the moment without grasping and attaching, allowing the thought to move on. Self is released and a fresh understanding refocuses the present moment for what it is. The mind as a mind without self, the mind as consciousness—a meditation of concentrated awareness, impermanence and non-self are realized.

The Awareness of Mental Experiences

"He remains focused on mental qualities in and of themselves with reference to the five hindrances. And how does a [practitioner] remain focused on mental qualities in and of themselves with reference to the five hindrances? There is the case where, there being sensual desire present within, a [practitioner] discerns that 'There is sensual desire present within me.' Or, there being no sensual desire present within, he discerns that 'There is no sensual desire present within me.' He discerns how there is the arising of unarisen sensual desire. And he discerns how there is the abandoning of sensual desire once it has arisen. And he discerns how there is no further appearance in the future of sensual desire that has been abandoned. [The same formula is repeated for the remaining hindrances: ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty.]…He remains focused internally on mental qualities in and of themselves, or externally on mental qualities in and of themselves, or both internally and externally on mental qualities in and of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to mental qualities, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to mental qualities, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to mental qualities…And he remains [undetached] independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world." MN 10.

Habit energies and impulsive reactions lure us as our motives lead to the transferring of karma habit energy. We simply have to be present to the incoming swells of feelings and emotions as only being situations and encounters quickly passing by. The insight of the Dharma is that we aren't self. Self is ignorance and carelessness. The Middle Way of not entering into extremes of self indulgence or conflict clears the stream of conscious confusion. We can look at our mind experiences without injecting self (desire, hatred or delusion). Without a self to inflate, there is only emptiness and freedom.

Meditation on Mental Experiences:

What mind experiences are echoing in your head? What thoughts or distractions are absorbing your attention? Feel how the distractions shape your attitude, keeping you off balance and unsettled. The mind becomes tight and pressing, tormented with suffering and problems.

Guide your attention from distractions and focus on your breath. Feel the change in quality from busy and active to open and caring, from self to non-self. When your sense contacts are calm so are your thoughts. The mind rests in a larger experience of restfulness and peace. Acknowledge the insight in these refined moments, opening to non-self appreciation.

Where is the personality and voice that each of us has been conditioned to be? The Five Groups of Self Attachment (body, feelings, perceptions, motives or mental reactions and consciousness) are no longer grasping. We have stepped out from ignorance and carelessness to experience the liberation from self. Without the craving to have and need, the motivation or karma of self isn't manifested. There is only a deep calm abiding. Here now you experience everything through awareness and wisdom. Time has stopped. Dharma insight is boundless. The mind is in quiet rapture.

These are the Four Foundations of Awareness. If you are a person easily taken in by desires and craving of sensual experience try focusing your meditation on the awareness of body. A logical person might try the awareness of Elements. Slowly expand your awareness to include the deeper understandings of Dharma insight and selfless reality.

"If anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven years…six years…five…four…three….two years…one year...seven months…six months…five...four...three...two months...one month…half a month…If anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven days, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here and now, or –if there be any remnant of clinging/sustenance—non-return." MN 10.

Awareness of Breathing Meditation

(*Anapanasati Sutta* MN 118)



In guided, step-by-step detail the Awareness of Breathing Meditation shows us how mindfulness brings realization to our lives. The Buddha practiced Awareness of Breathing during the night of his own awakening. The title refers to having full awareness of both the in as well as the out breath. The background to this discourse is during the end of a three month rains retreat, the Buddha expressed how pleased he was with the efforts of the large gathering of monks that he decided to stay on an extra month in practicing, sharing and instructing (It is interesting to read as the Buddha comments on the many different levels of spiritual and meditative experience and the camaraderie shared by everyone.). He goes on to mention that awareness of the breath is the common factor shared by all meditations. Below the sixteen penetrations are divided into tetrads. The Awareness of the Breath Meditation is the most comprehensive, overall appealing and instructive for our practice.

Awareness of the breath and the body:

1. ***"Breathing in long…or breathing out long, he discerns that he is breathing out long.***

2. ***"Or breathing in short…or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short.***

3. ***"He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the entire body, and to breathe out sensitive to the entire body.***

4. ***"He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily formations, and to breathe out calming bodily formations." MN 118***

We connect with the present moment through the breath. Nothing could be simpler or less demanding, but as you already know it is a challenge to concentrate. Sit comfortably and relaxed. Drop your shoulders, relax your

lower jaw, catch yourself if you are squinting or are having facial tension, allow the chest to breathe freely and the abdomen to drop. Waves of sensations pass as we breathe. Our nostrils flare while a bellows-like effect of the diaphragm moves and oxygen circulates, the heart beats and blood pulses. No two breaths are the same. Sometimes our shoulders will arch up with a deep breath, other times the breath comes from deeper in the abdomen. There is a lot going on with one simple breath.

As you first settle down to sit the breaths are heavy, deep and long. After some minutes the breathing changes to a short and easy respiration. This is the natural calming and ease from sitting at meditation. We only have to be a witness of the present moment. Breathe without being in your head to think and focus on your lungs and the action of the breath. The breath is a sensitive gauge. Quietly sitting with the breath, joy and a simple realization follow—yes, our habit energies are quieting down. The breath naturally leads to a calm body which leads to a quiet mind. Awareness, understanding and wisdom, everything is connected within the breath. Slowly we are separating from self.

Awareness of joy in calming the body and the mind:

5. "He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to rapture, and to breathe out sensitive to rapture.

6. "He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to pleasure, and to breathe out sensitive to pleasure.

7. "He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to mental formations (feeling & perception), and to breathe out sensitive to mental formations.

8. "He trains himself to breathe in calming mental formations, and to breathe out calming mental formations." MN 118.

Not only is there suffering and challenges in life but the awareness of joy as we separate and release from self. This is the clarity of the Middle Way having effect on our lives as we open to understanding and wisdom. We are calm, at ease and happy. Carelessness gives way to awareness, ignorance to the insight of a selfless peace.

Our awareness and attention are like a stirred up river bottom, unclear and cluttered, but now slowly settling down. The mind is a vessel through which the present moment is experienced. Self and ego are the culprits that label, attach, have expectations and are prejudice. We wildly react to the stresses of change and are off balance.

Feel the weight and pressure of having to be yourself. The mind becomes dull and disordered with fear, anger, doubt and confusion. We act and react from our limited experiences. Now we breathe deeply, focus on the breath and exhale our all-consuming self attitude. The mind begins to clear and settle. With each realized breath ego attachment weakens. Whatever our thoughts (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral) we note and see how we are consumed and try to relax our focus. Self squeezes and attaches to an experience, but with awareness we now consciously loosen the grip of self.

Awareness of opening and emptying of the mind:

9. "He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the mind, and to breathe out sensitive to the mind.

10. "He trains himself to breathe in satisfying the mind, and to breathe out satisfying the mind.

11. "He trains himself to breathe in steadying the mind, and to breathe out steadying the mind.

12. "He trains himself to breathe in releasing the mind, and to breathe out releasing the mind." MN 118.

The meditation began with the breath as a way of helping us center in the present moment through the body and physical sensations. Now we go on to take in our mental faculty. Observing thoughts, we note whether we are desiring, angry, confused or calm, at ease and aware. Witness and observe your mental experience. Feel how the mind narrows when confused as we get taken in by habit energies.

With every thought there is also a corresponding feeling. Try to sense where in your body you have also tightened up—stomach nervous, breath restricted and chest heavy, throat tight, forehead aching, eyes pressured, mouth dry,

ears ringing. These are the symptoms of self. Observe the thought without reacting to it.

Allow the mind to shift and expand. An overworked muscle becomes sore; a tense mind is pressured, painful, and confused. As you release the grasp of self, the mind becomes spacious and understanding. Appreciate your awareness, the happy, bright mind at ease. Practice letting go and not getting tied up by self and ego. If you are struggling or forcing the issue then stop and allow yourself to breathe naturally. The frustration will pass away. The more we struggle, the more we exhaust and hurt ourselves. The mind of the Middle Way is open, unattached and clear thinking.

Awareness of impermanence and releasing:

13. "He trains himself to breathe in focusing on impermanence, and to breathe out focusing on impermanence.

14. "He trains himself to breathe in focusing on dispassion, and to breathe out focusing on dispassion.

15. "He trains himself to breathe in focusing on cessation, and to breathe out focusing on cessation.

16. "He trains himself to breathe in focusing on relinquishment, and to breathe out focusing on relinquishment." MN 118.

The whole of the Dharma is revealed; meditation is not an escape but a penetration. Behind the changes we feel in our breaths, feelings and mental experiences is the deeper realization of wisdom—impermanence, the friction or suffering from impermanence and the non-self nature. We experience the simple yet profound insight of impermanence.

Yes, there are feelings. Yes, there are thoughts. Yes, things change. But where are we in this change? No self can be found—there are energies and the transferring of karma energies. Feel how the physical and mental absorption of impermanence build up, pass then release through you. Feel how you cling, become attached and suffer from being ignorant of the Dharma. Meditate on being unattached. Open up both the body and mind; we aren't the thought or the action. Flow with the Dharma. Ignorance and self are part of the many Everyday conditioned influences, always leading to

suffering and problems. Awareness and wisdom open us to being free from habit energies and impulsive reactions. Feel their cessation and the release from being consumed by self. This is nirvana, the end of all our craving and self promoted habit energies. The profound nature of the Dharma flows through you. Here you have penetrated to know the great wisdom of the Buddha. You have awakened.

The Immeasurables
(Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, Equanimity):



"Develop the meditation that is love, for by so doing, hatred will be got rid of. Develop the meditation that is compassion, for by so doing, harming will be got rid of. Develop the meditation that is sympathetic joy, for by so doing, dislike will be got rid of. Develop the meditation that is equanimity, for by so doing, sensory reaction will be got rid of. Develop the meditation on the impure, for by so doing, attachment will be got rid of. Develop the meditation that is the perception of impermanence, for by so doing, the conceit 'I am' will be got rid of." MN 1, 424.

"If one were to give a gift of a hundred coins in the morning, again at noon and again in the evening or instead, if one were to develop the mind of love in the morning, noon and evening…this would be by far the more beneficial of the two. Therefore, you should train yourself, thinking: "We will develop the liberation of the mind through love. We will practice it often. We will make it our vehicle and foundation. We will take our stand upon it, store it up and promote it." SN 2, 264.

The Buddha encountered many troubled persons during his life as well as accepting many challenging people into monastic practice. The most notable was Angulimala, the murderer. Everyone deserves a second chance in life, if not then we are all doomed by our mistakes and our imperfections. It isn't enough to talk platitudes but to genuinely extend our kindness. Try being 'accepting' of someone in your family or at work and see them with an attitude of compassion. Stop thinking of the other person as a threat or

the enemy and try offering patience and goodwill. Our spiritual practice is also all about loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—the Immeasurables.

I begin my days by going outside to the morning, bowing to the four cardinal directions then sincerely desiring that all beings and creatures the world over and throughout the universe be well. I go on to think about my immediate neighbors, friends and loved ones, the people in the city I am living in, wishing everyone goodwill. While our practice begins with ourselves, our awareness and awakening has us opening to everyone and everything. Leaving a job after years of service to pursue my spiritual calling, I went to every person in the building and said the following words, "May you be healthy, may you be happy, may you know peace and may you be loved." I also made sure to share these feelings with co-workers I had problems with. I could see they were surprised by the sentiment.

Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are 'immeasurable.' Their qualities of embracing awareness know no limits, have no definition, and extend themselves to everything and everyone. Also known as the Brahmaviharas or Sublime Abiding, the Immeasurables are an awakening to the non-self qualities of the Dharma and help provide a meaningful perspective to something other than our charged habit energies and impulsive reactions. As a formal meditation practice, the Immeasurables have a way of softening and opening the mind and our consciousness to a deeper understanding of wisdom and peace. Applying skillful means, the Buddha spoke to a Brahman who asked what were the most noble of qualities and characteristics that would take one to the Brahma realm of attainment. The Buddha responded that the 'Sublime Abiding' or Immeasurables bring us to this realization (DN 13).

As was mentioned about loving-kindness meditation in Chapter Three, there can be an initial resistance to the practice as well as feelings of awkwardness and uncertainty. Many people would prefer not to show or aren't accustomed to expressing their sensitive side or being overtly kind. Without good reason, it is considered a sign of weakness and vulnerability to be generous and compassionate. About the power of loving-kindness the Buddha said, "None of the means employed to acquire religious merit has a sixteenth part of the value of loving-kindness. Loving-kindness, which is freedom of heart, absorbs them all; it glows, it shines, it blazes forth."

Loving-kindness (Metta)
"Just as water cools both good and bad,
And washes away all impurity and dust,
In the same way you should develop thoughts of love
To Friend and foe alike,
And having reached perfection in love,
You will attain enlightenment." JN 168-169

Sit as you normally would for meditation. After doing a brief body scan, draw your attention and awareness toward yourself. Smile here in the moment. Smile not only physically but also mentally within yourself as you take a moment to be aware and caring. Follow your in and out breath, feel the ease and calm of the moment. Joy and happiness are part of our lives and spiritual practice.

Feel the gentleness move through you, down from your head, neck, warming through your torso and on down into the limbs of your arms and legs. As though bathed in warm soothing water, we are relaxed and at peace. Note how the gentleness within you softens and opens areas that are tense and difficult. Loving-kindness is done in a sequence of visualizations, reflections and offerings.

Should any anger or negativity arise in you, try repeating an affirmation. Here in this moment may I be relaxed. May I feel simple happiness. Let me feel kindness, friendship and caring for myself. I smile at who I am. My smile reaches deep within me and I open to kindness and goodwill. May I be a friend to myself.

Now that the energy of loving-kindness has been brought up within you, try now to offer and extend the same concern to a friend or family member. I am thinking of you now, my good friend. We have seen each other through many trials. I appreciate you always being there for me and being helpful. Thank you. You have made a difference in my life. I wish you well and your family, too. May you be blessed. As you meditate, take your time to feel the bonds of friendship and caring between you and the other person.

If possible think of a person at work or family member that you are having some differences or difficulties with. Don't think of an outright enemy. Again, begin by extending an offer of good will to this person. I know that at work things can be very hectic. We are pressured and sometimes we do

and say things that we don't mean. I am not the easiest of persons to get along with. I'm sorry for any upset or angry episodes. We have always managed to laugh it off later. I just got a little out of control. I will try to be more patient and I hope you can be patient with me. We have always talked things out. We can be direct without feeling badly. I will try to listen better. Take care of yourself. Thank you for your patience.

Loving-kindness is a powerful realization, at once healing, transforming and accepting. Our motives or karma are redirected as we go from selfish and one dimensional to being receptive, flexible, generous and willing. But we should proceed slowly. I spent over two years in intensive loving-kindness practice, coming to terms with ghosts and bitterness from my own past. I know how slow going the transformation can be. But with each session the wounds do begin to heal and close. We don't forget the hurt or injustice, but we forgive and accept.

Some of the benefits of having an awareness of loving-kindness are "one sleeps happily and wakes happily, one has no bad dreams, one is dear to both human and non-human, one is guarded by gods; fire, poison and swords do not affect one, the mind concentrates quickly, the complexion is clean, one dies without bewilderment, and if one develops no further, one will reach at least to the Brahma world." AN 5, 342.

Compassion (Karuna)

"To be a disciple of the Buddha your heart must bear no hatred, you must utter no unkind words, you must always be compassionate." MN 21.

Compassion was at the heart of the Buddha's intention and aspiration as he left his palace home life to understand the nature of suffering. However, compassion shouldn't be confused with pity, sorrow or looking down upon someone's misery by placing a value judgment on them. When we have compassion we sympathize and understand the other person's hardship. We are linked by our caring. Often we tend to think of compassion as a special quality that only persons like Jesus or Gandhi have. But compassion is for everyone and shared by everyone.

Sitting to meditate and a continuation of our loving-kindness practice, we turn our appreciation towards compassion. May I have compassion for myself. May the qualities of sympathy and caring be a part of my life. May

I have tenderness and know mercy. Feel how you naturally soften and open with compassion. There are areas within all of us which are reserved. Smile as you extend compassion to yourself. Yes, I forgive myself. I can't change my wrongdoing, but I can have compassion here and now. This much I can do.

Feel how your breath is now a gentle wisp of air as you have brought out the awareness of compassion. The body feels calm while the mind opens in empathy. Here the moment can feel as though we are releasing a dam of pent-up sorrows. To forgive and accept ourselves is to have compassion. Feel as you step out of your old selfish ways. But don't be angry or disappointed in yourself. Know mercy. I understand my rage and torment. I didn't know better, but now I can change. I know my suffering and have compassion for myself.

To have compassion is to understand and come to terms with the past. Yes, mother, you did the best you could. We had many hard times but that was the past. Here now I wish to say I'm sorry. I wish to forgive the past. There must be a compassionate resolution. Father, you weren't always there for me and I could have used your help and guidance. It was just the way things worked out. But now I wish to move on. I have accepted and forgiven myself and I accept and forgive you. I hope you are happy. Please, have a good life.

Bringing closure to the past frees you. Know the depths of compassion. Feel release and feel peace in your life. We draw strength and concentration from compassion. Realize the far reaching transformation that compassion can make in you. Sense how light and buoyant you feel as though you could touch the most remote corner of the universe. This is why the practice is known as 'immeasurable.' Compassion reaches everyone and embraces all suffering beings, including ourselves.

Sympathetic Joy (Mudita)
"Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be,
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,

Those born and to-be-born—
May all beings be at ease!" **SN I, 8**

Sympathetic joy opens to the simplest of virtues—to be happy for others. Most times our days are filled with what we can do for ourselves, how we can get ahead, with little regard for the people around us. Yet there is no escaping that we share and rely on others.

Wouldn't it be nice to hear congratulations when others succeed or during sporting events one person applauding the other for a good shot? But all too often habit energies of jealousy, pettiness, competitiveness and misunderstanding come out. Sympathetic joy or gladness is a genuinely felt happiness for another person's good fortune, success and their well being. We see the other person not as a threat but as part of our life.

Sit and experience the many pleasures, joys and the good fortune in your life to have 'awakened,' to have awareness and understanding. Breathe joy and gladness, knowing it in your body and your mind. Feel how light-hearted, content and at ease you are. Have happiness for your life. Yes, there is happiness when I am aware. I open myself to joy.

Now turn your thoughts to a friend and be happy for them. My friend, you have gone on to have a strong marriage and beautiful family. You have achieved many good things. You have been a good friend and I am truly happy for you.

If other people haven't succeeded as they had hoped for we can also console them. You did the best you could. Unfortunately, you weren't chosen. Later, you will be recognized. It just wasn't the right time. There is no need to be discouraged. You have a lot to be proud about. Another door will open and you will be rewarded.

Notice how you have come out from a petty shell of selfishness to be caring.

Equanimity (Upekkha)
"When his mind is concentrated he looks (upon all things) with thorough equanimity. This is called equanimity as a part of enlightenment."

At a Dharma gathering I mentioned in conversation that equanimity was the deepest and most all encompassing form of love and understanding that we could share. One woman didn't understand. I went on to explain that equanimity or the even-tempered, clear-minded person doesn't discriminate or judge and is accepting of everyone. Of course, this is something I am working on within myself, needing much more patience and understanding. Equanimity is a natural conclusion to Metta practice and generously rounds out the 'Immeasurables.' Everything and everyone is held in esteem.

Allow yourself to feel equanimity through your breath, body and mind. A warm ease flows over us. Self and ego has vanished. There is only peacefulness. Here now I feel the well being and centering of my practice. I am fortunate to know another way of dealing with life. The Dharma has brought me understanding and compassion. I have nothing to prove. I can also be accepting and forgiving. Yes, I can be at peace.

Direct your thoughts and feelings of equanimity to the world at large. I hope that my co-workers are happy in their lives and family situations. I know some of them are having problems with their teenage children. I hope they can come to an understanding. May my neighbors be happy, well and settled.

Though international troubles are far from me, I hope that things settle down quickly through peaceful political options rather than bloodshed. I do what I can in my own small way. I notice that I now listen to others. This is quite a change. I am less critical and argumentative. May all beings and creatures live in harmony and come to know peace in their lives. May they be fulfilled and contented. Equanimity is a settling sensitivity.

To live the Immeasurables is to be a fulfilled and deeply understanding person. Many people as they get older embrace loving-kindness, finally settling down and finished fighting, arguing and hating. But we don't have to wait to be old to be wise. Start right now. The Immeasurables cross over from self and suffering to caring and wisdom.

"Train yourself in doing good
that lasts and brings happiness.
Cultivate generosity, the life of peace,
and a mind of boundless love." IT 16

"Wise and mindful, you should develop immeasurable concentration [concentration based on immeasurable good will, compassion, appreciation, or equanimity]. When, wise and mindful, one has developed immeasurable concentration, five realizations arise right within oneself. Which five?

"The realization arises right within oneself that 'This concentration is blissful in the present and will result in bliss in the future.'

"The realization arises right within oneself that 'This concentration is noble and not connected with the baits of the flesh.'

"The realization arises right within oneself that 'This concentration is not obtained by base people.'

"The realization arises right within oneself that 'This concentration is peaceful, exquisite, the acquiring of serenity, the attainment of unity, not kept in place by the formations of forceful restraint.'

"The realization arises right within oneself that 'I enter into this concentration mindfully, and mindfully I emerge from it.'

"Wise and mindful, you should develop immeasurable concentration. When, wise and mindful, one has developed immeasurable concentration, these five realizations arise right within oneself." AN 5, 27.

The Eminent Penetrations
(Related to the formless realm of mental experiences and mind energy):



Infinite Space
Infinite Consciousness
Nothingness
Neither-Perception-or-Non-Perception

While the Centering Penetrations are related to the concentration and detachment from the body and our senses ('form' or the material realm), the Eminent Penetrations are the continuation for developing our deepening

awareness and concentration into mind motivations. They are considered 'formless,' relating to the mind and mental experience. Before proceeding with the Eminent Penetrations, we should be well practiced in the Centering Penetrations and have control of our Monkey Minds, along with insight into the impermanent and non-self aspects of the Dharma.

The Eminent Penetrations help open and expand our consciousness. We proceed slowly, doing only as much as we can without forcing ourselves to be a 'super guru.' Each one of us is different, has his or her own pace as well as unique abilities. We practice to understand, have insight and, ultimately, the wisdom of liberation—our peace. We are about to travel through the space-time of the mind.

Infinite Space (Beyond the Body and Senses):
"Again with the complete surmounting of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that 'space is infinite,' [the practitioner] enters upon and abides in the realm of infinite space." MN 26

"With the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that 'space is infinite,' [the practitioner] enters upon and abides in the realm of infinite space." MN 26.

Detached from the body and the stimulation of the senses, our awareness naturally goes to the vacuum and spaciousness of pure mind attention and mental capacity. The Eminent Penetrations are realized by the steady, mature practitioner.

Slowly you start to ascend through the Everyday atmosphere and up through the dark depths of the mind. There is a change in attitude as we go from concentrating on the breath and physical sensation to the smoother plane of formless mental energy. Habit energies and impulsive reactions flash as colored lights streaking by. For a moment everything seems dark and uncertain, but awareness clears and brightens the spacious atmosphere.

Mental concentration is weightless as we drift out from body and sense attachments. The spaciousness of the mind expands to an infinite capacity as the hazy fog of self evaporates, revealing a pure, clean boundlessness—

we have gone from self to non-self. Experience is no longer an experience, but an awareness of concentration.

Like an over inflated balloon bursting, our habit energies and impulsive reactions are dispersed. Nothing is conceived; only deep mindful awareness. Everyday perception limited us to only what we could see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. Underneath our conceptions, intellectualizing and limited personal views is formless, open awareness. We appreciate the immensity of mind. A revelation is coming into focus.

Infinite space gives way to infinite consciousness

Infinite Consciousness (Beyond Infinite Spaciousness):
"Again, by completely surmounting the realm of infinite space, aware that 'consciousness is infinite,' [the meditator] enters upon and abides in the realm of infinite consciousness." MN 26.

"Surmounting the realm of infinite space, aware that 'consciousness is infinite,' [the meditator] enters upon and abides in the realm of infinite consciousness." MN 26.

The guidance provided by the Buddha is intentionally less specific. We are considered mature meditators capable of leading ourselves to discovery. Our attention is distinguished by the underlying selfless consciousness which recognizes and is alert. Infinite consciousness is the mind as a clear, vast vessel; the mind knowing no history, preference or personality.

Imagine focusing on a pin point speck. Now soften and pull back your attention and allow the speck to fade until there is nothing to concentrate on. Consciousness opens to an expansive potential. There is no sense of time, place or feelings. Devoid of emotions and sentiment, clarity, lightness, space and dimensionless realization opens. Feel and know the wide flow of mind potential. Rest within in the freedom of infinite consciousness.

Beyond the blur of sense action and stimulation, beyond the I, me, mine attitude of intellect and limited personal views is an immaculate, far reaching realization. The calling of karma, the compelling voice of habits urging us to act, is muted. Clarity as consciousness, consciousness as mind, mind as infinite—the mind cleared to wisdom.

Infinite consciousness gives way to emptiness.

Emptiness (Beyond Infinite Consciousness):
"Again, by completely surmounting the realm of infinite consciousness, aware that 'there is nothing,' [the meditator] enters upon and abides in the realm of nothingness [emptiness]." MN 26.

"Surmounting the realm of infinite consciousness, aware that 'there is nothing,' [the meditator] upon and abides in the realm of nothingness." MN 26.

"Here, with the complete surmounting of the realm of infinite consciousness, aware that 'there is nothing,' [the meditator] enters upon and abides in the realm of nothingness. This is called the deliverance of mind through nothingness." MN 43.

Our experience of the Dharma has showed us that everything changes. Known through a calm and penetrated mind, we experience 'emptiness' or stopping of our self promoting habits in the form of a deep concentration and absence of habits. Note in this deep stillness how the urge to crave, desire and become have dissipated.

Beyond our deluded intellectual grasping and imagination, there is nothing to perceive but the spaciousness of emptiness. Feel how in your expanded consciousness and awareness there is no sense of place or being as the connection to the Five Groups of Self Attachment has faded. There is only an observance of clear, conscious awareness. Here is a true gleaning to the freedom of non-self.

Emptiness gives way to neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception (Beyond Nothingness):
"Again, by completely surmounting the realm of nothingness, [the meditator] enters upon and abides in the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception." MN 26.

Now with a penetrating conscious awareness our deepened perception and concentration turns itself around to an awareness of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; an observance without having to perceive. There is only an

‘awakened’ consciousness and concentration which ‘knows’ but doesn’t judge or separate. In the beginning we saw ourselves as self and everything around us as objects of self in their own right. Our consciousness has expanded beyond form to a pure, calm, formless concentration. There is no self-perceiving. The profound Heart Sutra reveals the deep awareness and understanding:

“The [practitioner], grounded in perfect understanding,
finds no obstacles for their minds.
Having no obstacles, they overcome fear, liberating themselves
forever from illusion and realizing perfect nirvana.
All Buddhas in the past, present, and future,
thanks to this perfect understanding,
Arrive at full, right, and universal enlightenment.
Therefore one should know
That perfect understanding is the highest mantra,
the unequalled mantra, the destroyer of ill-being,
the incorruptible truth.”

Everyone is capable of penetrating non-self. This is an inherent and natural consciousness; an uncorrupted state of insight and awareness. The unabsorbed mind is without obstacles and is limitless. The Buddha recalling a youthful episode while sitting serenely under the roseapple tree saw how the moment reflected a mind that was open and led to the settling experience of the Middle Way and the Ennobling Eightfold Path.

Don’t be in a hurry to cultivate or have a breakthrough in the Eminent Penetrations. Explore the qualities of an expanded consciousness. Feel how you achieve concentration and have awareness. The root for all defilements obscuring the true nature of life is ignorance; to overcome our habit energies is to overcome the craving and clinging of self. The awakening experience of Insight Meditation is the realization of the Dharma: impermanence, the friction and suffering from impermanence, and the non-self nature of life.

Life Practice

The insight meditations presented here take some time of committed practice to apply and mature within us. Just as a fruit tree grows slowly from a sapling and bears fruit some seasons later, our practice develops, needing regular watering and care.

A concert pianist spends thousands of hours practicing to make their performance effortless. An Olympic athlete trains for years prior to their event. The Buddha spent six years in intense training and investigation then devoted his remaining forty five years to practice and sharing the insights of the Dharma. Make things simple for yourself—be aware of the present moment.

Don't be overwhelmed by the different meditations and their jargon. The Buddha helpfully documented all the aspects of practice leading to awakening. In the end the words are only the proverbial finger pointing the way. What counts is your making the effort to meditate with awareness and concentration.

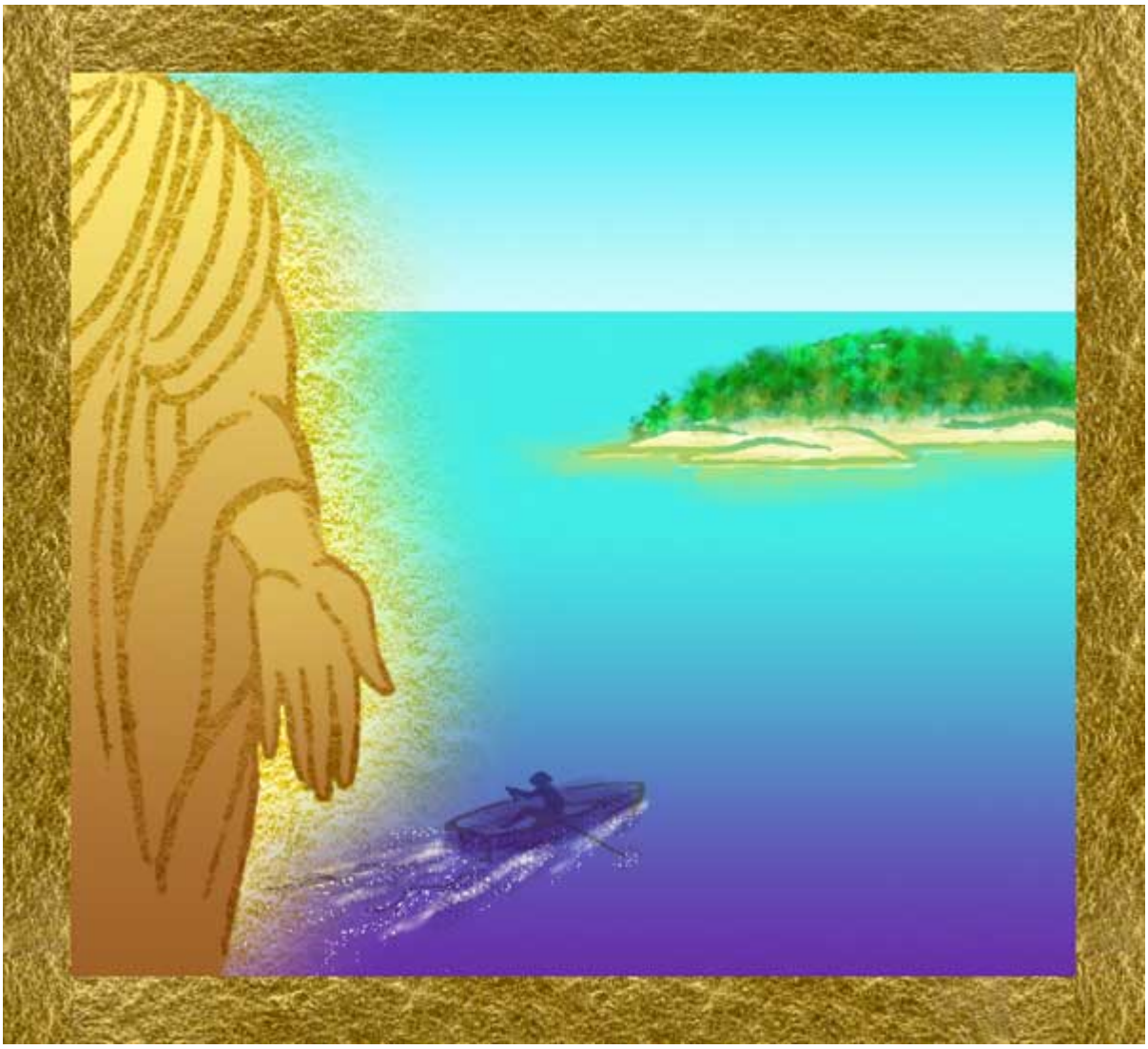
Slowly build your confidence, picking out one or two meditations that appeal to you. Trying to do too much will only make you lose interest in practicing. A good way of learning and applying the Concentration Penetrations is to practice one, become familiar with each stage of recognition and experience then to confidently go on to the next. You can put into practice the Four Foundations of Awareness while you are sitting at your desk working or doing any activity. Feel how stress, tension, or doing a job with an intense attitude carries over and charges your body and mind. This is a 'self' reaction. Let go of your attachments and expectations. Open your conscious awareness.

If you are a good meditator on the cushion and then go on to be angry, confused or fearful in your life, then your practice is one sided. Feel and know equanimity. You don't have to react out of habit. Feel and know the Immeasureables rather than desire, anger and confusion. Become familiar with your body and mind states as practiced in the Four Foundations of Awareness. Feel and know how you go from awareness of the moment to total release from 'self' and freedom from suffering as practiced in the Awareness of the Breath. Our spiritual recognition touches every aspect of our lives. The Dharma is an experience and not an intellectual effort. Apply the meditations as a life practice.

You have awakened to the limitations of self and have penetrated the experience of Dharma Wisdom.

Chapter Fourteen

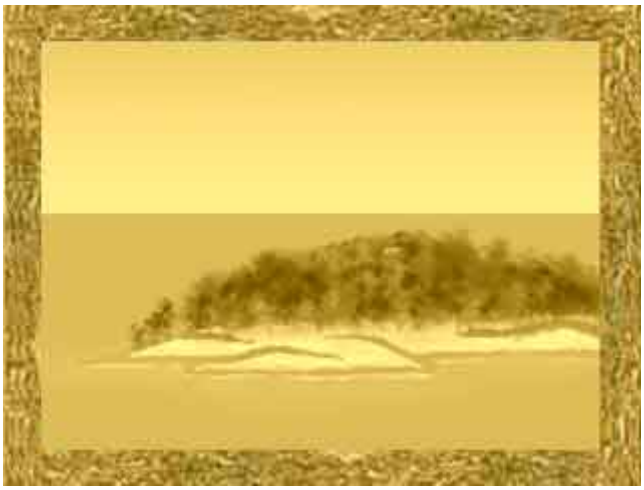
REFUGE AND RENUNCIATION—
The Buddha, The Dharma, The Sangha and Us



"He who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, sees with right knowledge the Four Noble Truths—Suffering, the Cause of Suffering, the Transcending of Suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path which leads to the Cessation of Suffering. This, indeed, is the refuge secure. This, indeed, is refuge supreme. By seeking such refuge one is released from all suffering." DH 190-192. "In the same way, if, due to lack of faith, conscientiousness, fear of blame, energy and wisdom, good things are not practiced by one, then one must be watched over by me. But

when good things are practiced, then I need not look after one, thinking: 'He can now look after himself; he is done with foolishness.'" AN 3, 6.

Our Practice



We sit now in the evening with the Buddha. A twilight of flame colors lights the sky, reflecting in warm tones over the landscape as well as on the Buddha's face.

"Abandon wrong. It can be done. If it were impossible to do, I would not urge you to do so. But since it can be done, I say to you: 'abandon wrong.' If abandoning wrong brought loss and suffering, I would not encourage you to do so. But since it conduces to benefit and happiness, I urge you to: 'abandon wrong.' Cultivate the good. It can be done. If it were impossible to do, I would not urge you to do so. But since it can be done I say to you: 'cultivate the good.' If cultivating the good brought loss and suffering, I would not urge you to do so. But since it conduces to benefit and happiness, I urge you to: 'cultivate good.'" (AN 1, 58).

The Buddha nods his head in affirmation.

"Whoever is wise and full of faith, deeply learned, holding fast to Dharma and living according to it—'light of the Sangha' they are called…male and female disciples fully endowed with faith—It is they who illuminate the Sangha 'Light of the Sangha they are called.' (A 2, 8).

"I, too, have the faith, the virtue, the learning, the generosity, and the wisdom…At a time when the noble [practitioner] recollects all these things, his mind is freed from greed, hatred and delusion. At that time…he expresses the gladness of the Dharma, and the gladness that goes with the Dharma. In one who is glad, joy arises; because of joy, the body is tranquil; with tranquil body one is happy, and the mind of one who is happy is concentrated. About a person like this, it is said: 'the noble

[practitioner] who recollects the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, who recollects virtue, generosity…—that [practitioner] dwells evenly among folk who dwell unevenly.' "(AN 5, 332).

"[As monastics], householders are most helpful to [us] since they provide [us] with robe, bowl, lodging and seat, medicines and the necessities for sickness. [As monastics we] also are most helpful to householders, since [we] teach them the Dharma that is lovely in the beginning, lovely in the middle and lovely at the end, both in letter and spirit. [We] proclaim to [you] the holy life in all its completeness and purity. Therefore, the holy life is lived in mutual dependency, for crossing the flood, for the overcoming of suffering." (IT 111).

"…Monks and nuns, the laymen and laywomen live with reverence and heed to the Teacher, the Dharma and the Sangha, live with reverence and heed to the training, to the concentration, to earnestness and to goodwill, then the good Dharma will last long. (AN 4, 83). . .Just call to mind the Buddha and no fear or trembling will arise. If you cannot think of the Buddha, this best, this highest, this finest of man, then call to mind the Dharma, the well taught guide. If you cannot think of the Dharma, the well taught guide then think of the Sangha, that incomparable source of good in the world. (SN 1)…Deep reverence for the Teacher, the Dharma and the Sangha. With earnestness and love a [practitioner] will not fail; he is near Nirvana." (AN 3, 330).

The Buddha's eyes shine brightly in the evening twilight.

From carelessness to awareness; from habit energies and impulsive reactions to understanding and insight; from suffering and problems to wise action and wisdom, our journey has brought us to terms with the most important of all understandings and insights—how we live, our suffering and our release. The Buddha has been our generous guide, having great patience with us. But he can't give us wisdom. He has shown us the cause, the symptoms and the cure, it is now up to us to apply the understanding and put it into action.

While I have many weaknesses and moments where habit energies get the better of me, with each passing day my life improves as I have awareness and caring of my motives and actions. Yes, I do falter, but I catch myself, smile, sometimes laugh at my antics and proceed to right myself. These aren't excuses I am offering but rather than being a hard-nosed,

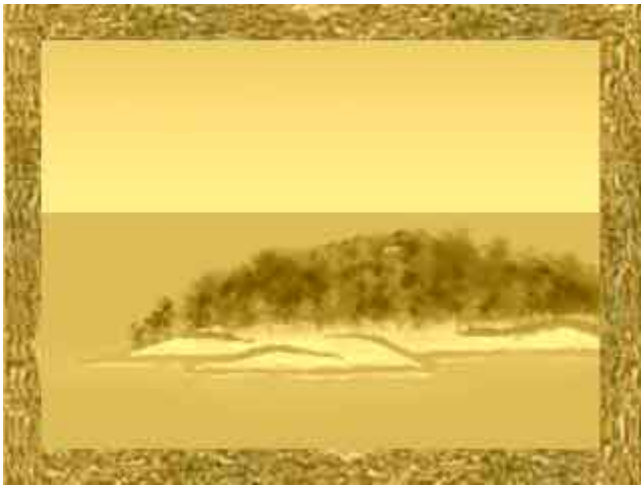
perfectionist, we should have patience and forgiveness for ourselves. Observe and learn from your lapses rather than blaming or finding guilt. This is having wisdom. Once you are unaware, twice you are forgiven, a third time you are foolish.

For example, at an East Coast facility one practitioner snuck out to go to a football playoff game. The man went on to have some beers and hot dogs then later that night crept back in. Feeling remorseful, the next day the man confessed his 'great escape' to Dipa Ma, the meditation instructor from India leading the retreat. Normally, he would have been asked to leave the retreat, but Dipa Ma came forward, hugged him and the retreat proceeded.

At a one-month retreat I was attending, one recovering alcoholic came up with an excuse to leave, disappeared for two days and had a drunken relapse. The woman returned to the retreat, apologizing before everyone.

Wanting to know what the Buddha had to say about guilt I found the Conch Trumpet Discourse (SN XLII.8). The Buddha offered a deep consoling insight. Should we stray from Wise Action or be less than honorable and upstanding, should we then never again commit or fall victim to our careless habit energies we would be absolved. This is a keen insight into our habit energies and demonstrates the forgiveness and non-judging which makes Buddhist practice unique. Of course, the Buddha mentioned that only trivial or lesser slip-ups on our part could be overlooked as long as we didn't fall back to committing them again. More serious actions of murder, rape, chronic drug or alcohol abuse, lies of great consequences still would have far reaching implications and weigh on us. When we are less than perfect there is the understanding that we can right ourselves and proceed with our lives.

Renunciation



Renunciation is a strong word. One imagines seclusion and penance. These practices may help, but they do have their limits. Renunciation is really the stopping of harmful and negative habits that bring us to suffering and problems while

cultivating wise actions which are understanding and responsible. Simply put, “To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one’s mind—this is the teaching of the Buddhas.” DH 183.

I may be a monastic in robes and shaved head, but this is only a form. If I still were angry, lied, stole or were dishonest then the monk model would be pointless. I know some monks who aren’t particularly noble or insightful and lay people who I consider to be my Dharma Elders.

The curious thing about Western practitioners is that they want to keep or feel the need for a life of luxury and leisure. Spiritual practice is about simplicity, cutting back or trimming away ‘the fat’ from the distracting experiences in our lives. Some sacrifice and determination is required in everything we do in life. For example, going to night school requires giving up some social activity and putting time in for studying and writing papers. You can’t have and do everything because you end up hurting yourself and being confused.

Looking back to my early days on weekend retreats and attending Dharma talks, I perceived an attitude of ‘weekend warrior’ or part time spiritualism. This is where practice is reserved for retreats or Dharma talks and then afterwards people fall back into their habit filled ways and comfortable material life style. I have known some practitioners of many years’ experience who say they wouldn’t mind being a monastic but didn’t want to cut their hair or how they still need to have one thing or another. In the end these are all excuses for not committing oneself to practice.

At one US Zen temple I visited eating meat as well as drinking alcohol was allowed and the late American Roshi was also a chain smoker. They wanted to make practice as ‘normal’ and ‘real’ to life as possible. When I declined to eat meat and spoke of compassion it raised eyebrows. I was soon dismissed from the temple after two weeks for being ‘pious.’ You can’t have it both ways, one foot in awareness and the other straddling in careless habit energies. It is either you are wise or unwise. The foot that rests in the quick sand of habits will always slip and bring down your whole practice. Look at it as dropping your burdensome bag of habits while keeping awareness, compassion and insight.

Often puzzled people ask me how I could give up working, having health insurance, cars, being a vegetarian and the securities of ‘everyday’ life.

Well, if anything I tell them I am freer, more relaxed, at ease, less worried, unattached as well as being more open and caring. One former co-worker invited me to his home to talk about 'spiritualism.' I gave him the address of the temple, the hours we meditated and the day of our weekly Dharma talk. He never came. Many people bubble with enthusiasm but are uncommitted. They can be found entranced in front of their television sets or too busy in their consumer lives. Some time before taking vows I lost contact with one close friend, saying he didn't have the time for friendship anymore. He was too busy with his two children, job, mortgage payments and family obligations. He communicated with me some years later, but then shortly after wrote me back the same response—he was too busy. We can be overwhelmed and distracted by many unimportant and deceiving desires. Of course, family is first, but to get caught up in the consumer, workaholic run around has people crying for a sane outlet. Meditation and a spiritual practice are just that. A spiritual life is about priorities. We have more time to care, be generous, listen and relate to other people as we leave behind the frivolous and the unproductive.

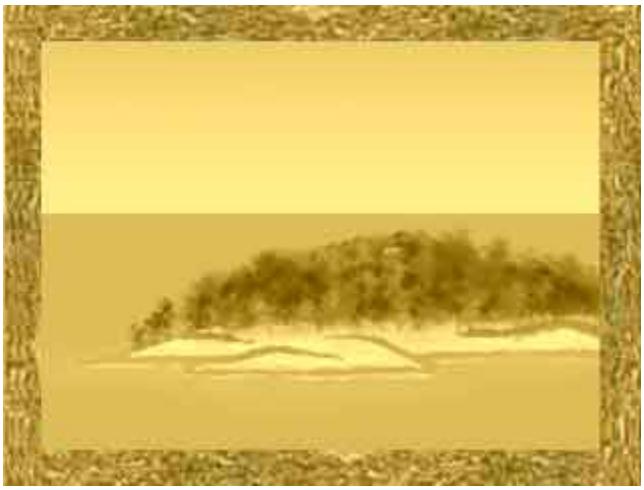
It comes down to personal responsibility. I know monastics who eat meat, people who have firearms, others who belly-up to the bar for their evening cocktails, and others who are less than reliable and honest. I don't frown on anyone. You don't go around spouting platitudes at every moment. There is a 'right time' when to talk to a person and only if they are willing and capable of listening. Outside of this we have to live life and be at peace with our surroundings. In the end we are responsible for ourselves.

Next door to my old temple lived a kind and generous 80-year old woman who followed the Catholic religion. I took to cutting her lawn and helping her with odd jobs. The highlight of my week was to visit with her on Sunday evenings. A monastic brother of mine thought that it was wrong and that I shouldn't have casual contact with lay people, least of all a woman. I stressed that she was 80 years old and that I was befriending her. I learned many 'Catholic lessons' from Mrs. Silva. I called her my angel and she would laugh that she was an angel with horns!

Probably the most well known story in all of Buddhism is of two monks who meet a woman at a stream crossing. One monk carries the woman on his back across the flowing water. Later as the monks continued their journey, the other monk criticized and reprimanded his monastic brother for dealings with a woman. "I left her at the stream, you are still carrying her," answered

the helpful monk. We have to be flexible. A nun fell down the stairs once and lay dazed on the floor. I spoke gently, asking her to try moving her limbs, had her sit up, then lifted her back up to her feet. She was all right but sore. One thing is to help and another is to lust. As I am fond of saying, it is all about compassion, not passion.

The Triple Gem
(The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha)



I had bowed three times before the temple altar and the Buddha statue. One woman asked me after I had finished prostrating what I was doing. I mentioned that I was bowing in deference to the Buddha, the Dharma and Sangha. Her question was sincerely asked. Coincidently, that evening the Dharma discussion was to be on the Triple Gem: The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Bowing isn't something normally done in Western culture. We are a hand shaking, hand waving, backslapping, hugging, broad smiling demonstrative society. But in the East bowing is a display of respect, dedication, confirmation, and loyalty. Bowing takes effort as well as humility to go down to your knees and prostrate. Reading the discourses, the Buddha was greeted by monks bearing the right shoulder, bowing three times then to sit off to one side but not directly in front of him (circumambulating three times around a person is no longer done except on rare formal occasions). These were the customs of ancient India and have been preserved through most of the Buddhist practicing world. I have been injured in the past where I couldn't fully prostrate to the ground and half bowed from a standing position. One's sincere intention is what counts. As a monastic, when visiting another temple or in the presence of a Senior Master or any Dharma Elder, one normally bows three times. At times there is a lot of bowing going on in Buddhism.

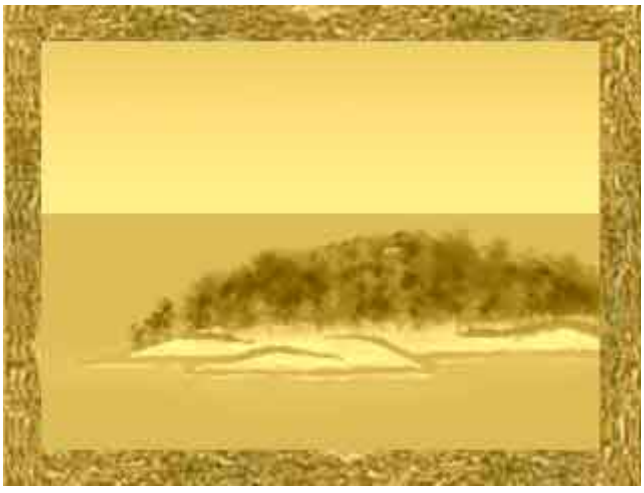
Later during our Dharma discussion I brought up the earlier question by the woman and taking refuge in the Triple Gem was discussed. I mentioned that for me the Buddha not only meant the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama, but also his great wisdom and penetrating insight. I also referred to how bowing was an intimate moment for me as I summoned up wisdom and insight within myself. I gratefully bowed to the Buddha, to the spiritual ancestors who came before him and acknowledge the many spiritual travelers whose efforts have now reached me. We should bow sincerely and feel a deep respect for all 'awakened' beings.

The Dharma is the Truth, the Way life really is: impermanent, the friction, suffering and problems coming from impermanence as well as the non-self nature of all things. I bow to empty myself of all my habit energies. I end my second bow by thinking, whatever form the earth and the universe make me, may I be at peace.

The Sangha, of course, refers to a group of Dharma practitioners: laymen and laywomen as well as monks and nuns. But for myself, I broadened my practice to include all moments, circumstances, situations and encounters, bowing for the third and final time.

The abbot of the temple went on to talk to the group and mentioned how, of course, the Buddha statue was only symbolic. But again, we are showing respect to the Awakened One and the practice that has developed from his insights. The abbot went on to mention the Buddha didn't need or want recognition, but through our bowing we show generosity, goodwill, openness as well as respect not only to the Buddha but also have this attitude of respect and value towards everyone and for everything.

Taking Refuge



A refuge is a safe haven or a place to go when you are distressed or need security. A Buddhist temple or any church, synagogue, mosque or temple for that matter, is a place of refuge. No one is turned away at a Buddhist temple.

The abbot where I trained as a novice monk, told me how he befriended one man who came to stay the night at the temple. The man went on to steal the temple checkbook as well as the temple car. The abbot added that he wouldn't have done it any differently. Again refuge was offered, but personal responsibility becomes the issue. The befriended man could have taken good advantage of the help that was being offered to him, but he chose otherwise. In another situation a man one night called the Temple from jail where he was detained due to visa problems on entering America from Vietnam. The abbot again went to defend the man and within two months had him out of jail and working. The man stayed with us at the temple for a few weeks before striking it out on his own. Personal responsibility and one's motives standout as the key issues.

Much is made about the difference between monatics and lay people. But the Dharma touches all our lives in the same way. The difference is in the approach towards practice. The monastic sangha couldn't exist without the generosity and help of the lay sangha and in turn the insights of the Dharma are shared with the lay followers. The Buddha did it intentionally this way so that the two would be interdependent. For monastics understanding and coming to terms with karma and no longer promoting selfish intentions or motives while living a celibate life is part of the practice. For lay people following the Wise Actions of not harming but being kind, not stealing but being generous, not lying but speaking truthfully, being sexually responsible and mindful of alcohol and drug consumption is how they should follow the Dharma.

A general misunderstanding exists as many people assume that they have to dropout and stop their connection with their present faith or religious practice. This isn't the case nor is it expected of Buddhist practitioners. A remarkable encounter occurred when Upali, who followed a different practice and elder, went to challenge the Buddha and in the end found himself taking refuge in the Triple Gem. The Buddha encouraged Upali to continue supporting his teacher and not to give up his former practice.

"Make a proper investigation first," the Buddha cautioned.

"Now I am even more pleased and satisfied when the Lord says to me: 'Make a proper investigation first.' For if members of another religion had secured me as a disciple they would have paraded a banner all around the town saying: 'Upali has joined our religion.' But the [Buddha] says to me:

Make a proper investigation first. Proper investigation is good for a well-known person like yourself.' " MN 56.

Mahatma Gandhi mentioned that he was part of all faiths, reading and referring to the Bible and the Koran. Buddhism is no different. Where the practice is genuine and serving, we can all learn. I am taken with Christianity and the offerings of Jesus. He was a truly noble and 'awakened' person. His insights to compassion, the human situation, and his great faith are a stirring example. The Catholic saints and more recently Mother Theresa, are a true testament of a devoted life. We can all learn from the compassion, the generosity and the insight of all religions. Buddhism offers its own unique point of view. One Theravada monk I know ends his Dharma talks by telling the audience to take and apply what they can use and to leave the rest behind. There is no brain washing, accepting on faith or blind trust. Buddhist practice and awareness is an open invitation.

The villagers of Kalama approached the Buddha to ask who they should put their faith and trust in with so many spiritual masters and gurus passing through. The Buddha responded, "…Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness' -- then you should enter and remain in them." AN 3, 65.

A serious moment comes for each of us when he or she decides to make a commitment by taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha as well as following the Five Wise Actions as the guiding principles in one's life. Refuge in the Triple Gem as an awareness and true potential then becomes our liberation.

But to take refuge in the
Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha
and to see with real understanding
the Four Noble Truths.
Suffering, the cause of suffering,
the transcending of suffering and
the Noble Eightfold Path that leads
to the transcending of suffering.

This indeed is a safe refuge,
it is the refuge supreme.
It is the refuge whereby one is
freed from all suffering. DH 190-192

Taking Refuge in the Buddha: confident acceptance of the fact that one can become 'awakened,' having awareness of our actions through body, speech and thought, and to be responsible. Refuge isn't taken in the Buddha as a deity to solve our problems, in spiritual favors or to bring us salvation, but in the example he has given us of insight, virtue and meditation. The only assurance we have is from our own efforts. As the Buddha came to his great understanding and awakening, we empower ourselves. We experience the realizations of the Four Noble Truths and the transformation of the Noble Eightfold Path to liberation.

Taking Refuge in the Dharma: understanding the Four Noble Truths and conducting our lives in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path. We are on the Path to Peace towards Nirvana and ultimate Peace. We practice the Five Wise Actions to the best of our abilities. The understanding and realization of the insights of the Dharma are all around us: impermanence, the suffering from impermanence and the non-self nature of all life. Wisdom is known from our realization and stopping of all self-promoting actions. The Buddha said, "He honors me best who practices my teaching best…He who sees the Dharma sees me."

Rumors, superstitions, miracles, blind faith and trust, pre-conceived notions and intellectual speculation have no place in the Dharma.

Taking Refuge in the Sangha: is normally considered the formally ordained body of monks and nuns following the monastic code, but now has gone on to include everyone on the Path to Peace. From the beginning, the Buddha reached out and has relied upon the lay community, establishing a mutual cooperation and involvement. The true ideal of liberation is shared by committed senior practitioners who provide us with the example and support needed for our own 'awakening.'

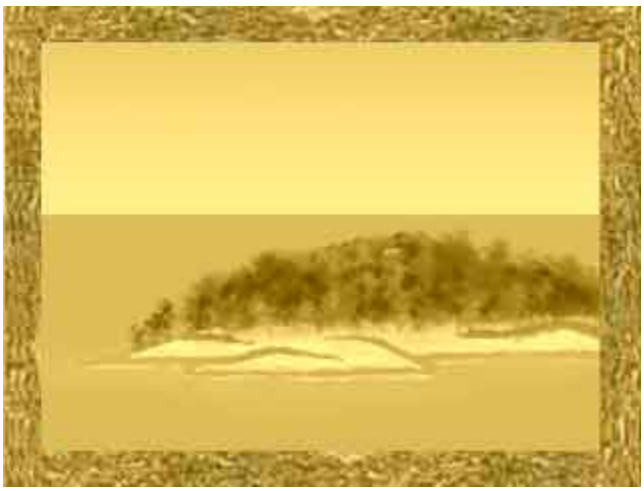
The Wise Actions

The Five Wise Actions ground us in awareness, responsibility and understanding, generated through our body, speech and thoughts. The Wise Actions are no different than any other faith's 'golden rules.' But Buddhism

applies a different perspective; our actions have motives and ultimately free will is involved as careless karma plays itself out over and over. In other words, we should reflect deeply before we think, do or say anything. The Everyday and the Known reveal themselves to us. If any of you have seen the entertaining movie, Groundhog Day, where the character repeats the same day over and over again until he finally gets it 'right,' karma is very similar to this except it is only habit energy that is transferred and not a specific person or soul.

Assuming responsibility of our actions leads us to wisdom. "If anyone with a pure heart undertakes a commitment to virtue—to refrain from taking life, from taking what is not given, from sexual immorality, from lying speech, and from taking strong drink and sloth-producing drugs—that constitutes a sacrifice better than giving alms, better than giving shelter, and better than going for refuge." DN.

The Ten Perfections of the Bodhisattva



We should be happy in our lives and practice but happiness by itself is a practice without understanding. Before his enlightenment, the Buddha practiced and 'perfected' ten ennobling qualities. '

A Buddha such as Siddhartha Gotama comes along only once in many, many eons. Having the good fortune to follow in his footsteps, we are 'Bodhisattvas' headed for awakening and liberation. All moments, situations, circumstances, and encounters reflect our budding understanding. We don't see enemies but friends. We don't insult or hate but are caring and generous. This isn't about being a do-gooder but having deeper insight into the energies that make our lives. We also see the underlying conditions and influences leading others to their suffering and problems. As a friend, brother and sister of everyone, we have compassion because we have emerged from the blinding anger and desires which consume so many others. "Being reviled, he reviles not; being beaten, he beats not; being annoyed, he annoys not.

His forgiveness is unfailing even as the mother earth suffers in silence all that may be done to her."

I have heard masters tell how during adversity they put all their focus and emphasis on the realization of the Dharma. They would prefer to die and have their last thoughts clear and on the true nature of life rather than be distracted and deluded. Below are the Ten Perfections with real life quotes from ancient practitioners as they experienced their own insight into the Dharma.

Generosity

Consumed with desire and only doing for ourselves is a vain and empty pursuit. Generosity naturally transforms selfishness, greed, and arrogance. We share on whatever level we can.

Don't judge the moment or the person, but share without having expectations. It can be a small favor, communicating with a friend we haven't heard from in a while, or checking up on someone who might be sick. At times we may be busy or preoccupied, but during the course of the day little acts of kindness such as listening to the other person and 'feeling' for their situation is what we can offer. There is an actual joy and happiness when we are involved and caring for others. We share our deeper values.

Generosity becomes a natural way and expression. We are open, giving, good natured, natural and at ease. When the other person is helped and bettered, we feel their strength. What we have belongs to everyone through the great circle of generosity and goodwill. What starts as an individual act carries over. Our own needs are few that we rarely find ourselves needing or asking for help. You don't have to be Mother Theresa or the Dalai Lama accomplishing some headline humanitarian effort, but are naturally generous and kind. People rely on us for being trustworthy.

The perfection of generosity actually opens us up to deeper insight.

Virtue

"Virtue is the foundation, the forerunner, the origin of all that is good and beautiful, and therefore one should purify one's virtue…Virtue is the control, the restraint and the delighting of the mind, and thus the place where all Buddhas cross over. Therefore, one should purify one's

virtue…Virtue is the food for the journey, virtue is the best vehicle for going in any direction." Thag 608-616.

Every aspect of our spiritual practice, our awareness and understanding, is expressed through our mind and motives of virtue and through our wise action. Our conduct relates to who we are as parents, how we behave as friends and as a society.

A Bodhisattva perfects the Five Wise Actions of not harming, not stealing, nor lying, being chaste and doesn't indulge in alcohol or drugs. When we act carelessly we are actually harmful to others and abusive to ourselves. While we may not live in a perfect world this doesn't mean that we shouldn't be responsible. If everyone were reasonable and realized the consequences of their actions from government officials to entertainers and all the way throughout society, the world would be a much different place. Whatever our place in society, we have an important role to fill—doing our best. It is only when we are consumed with our own desires that we become estranged from the world. It is easier to have Virtue or Wise Action because the suffering we put ourselves through when we are unaware is painful and exhausting.

Virtue transforms hatred to kindness, jealousy to sympathy, craving to fulfillment, fear to patience.

Renunciation

"Rightly grasping the [Groups of Self Attachment]
arising-disbanding --
will return to the hillside, intent
on seclusion." Therg. 1, 23

"Rouse yourselves.
Go forth.
Apply yourselves
to the Awakened One's bidding…
He who, in this doctrine and discipline,
remains heedful…,
will put an end to suffering and stress." Therag 3, 13

Renunciation is often misunderstood. We don't renounce friends and family; we don't renounce caring and our good nature—we do renounce everything that is unwise (desires, anger, doubt, fear and confusion). Carelessness and weaker habits give way to awareness and wise actions. Wanting and needing the latest consumer goods, fashions, stylish car and a demanding lifestyle only keep us tied to craving and desires. The attachment to sensual pleasure, to the notion of a self or to the misunderstanding of no-self are renounced. Through the insights of the Dharma, we open to personal awareness.

Wisdom

"There's no tying down one who knows." Therag 1, 14

Insight and wisdom are cultivated in three ways. First there is insight shared through our contact with teachers and Dharma friends helping deepen our realization. There is also the insight from studying and penetrating the discourses and Dharma offerings through books (a certain amount of reflection is required). But understanding isn't fulfilled until we have realized personal direct experience and intuition in our lives as wisdom then cuts through the illusion of self and habit energies to insight.

Wisdom is when we come to realize the deep meaning of self promoted suffering in the Four Noble Truths and the deliverance from self through the Noble Eightfold Path.

Effort

Effort is a quality of action or behavior—our character. Effort first begins with an attitude and as a clear and positive mental energy. Like a camera lens focusing, effort is the action that sharpens awareness. A blurred mind is warped and distorted by habit energies. Having right effort focuses our whole practice and understanding to a clear and positive mental energy. Effort uplifts laziness, worry and fear.

When we are weak or selfish we become negative and the skeptic in us comes forward. With proper effort we are settled to meditate and have the realization needed to continue our practice. Reading about Mahatma Gandhi, he commented that the only difference between himself and any other person realizing the same spiritual goals was his perseverance. Right or wrong effort can be a handicap or a boon to our spiritual journey. Wise Effort mentioned in the Noble Eightfold Path prevents and transforms

unwholesome thoughts while promoting and maintaining wholesome, skillful thoughts.

Patience

"Formerly this wandering mind, a wanderer,
went where it wished, wherever whim or pleasure led,
today I shall thoroughly restrain it
as a trainer's hook the elephant in rut." Therag. 14, 40.

Our whole spiritual practice thrives on patience. Some moments and experiences of practice are difficult and tiring, but having patience will see you through. Patience goes on to allow our minds to clear for the understanding of the Middle Way and Dharma insight. Through patience our breakthrough wisdom and equanimity are known. Patience is the brake applied to a runaway reckless life. Goodwill and loving-kindness are seeds that begin to sprout from having patience. Through patience we begin to realize how everyday impulses aggravate and worsen a situation while we have the patience to let events and situations run their course without having to fight or struggle. When challenged we have the confidence of our mindful practice.

Truthfulness

"One should speak as one would act,
and not as one wouldn't.
When one speaks without acting,
the wise, they can tell." Therag 3, 15.

Truthfulness and honesty are at the center of a spiritual life. To know the Dharma we must be truthful. Trivial conversations, frivolous actions, and silly thoughts weaken and fade away with our commitment to the Bodhisattva ideal.

People naturally perceive us with confidence and are reassured in our company. Our inner values reflect our thoughtfulness. Rather than fight or blame, we offer realistic solutions. If necessary, we don't hesitate to apologize or make amends for any misunderstanding.

Determination and Resolution

What needs to be done with firm persistence,
what needs to be done

by someone who hopes for Awakening,
that I will do.
I will not fail.
See: persistence and striving! Therag 2, 24

Everything we do requires determination—noble and wise determination. Spiritual practice requires time being alone to meditate, to settle down and for personal reflection. Being resolute and consistent in our practice sees us through the distractions of self and ego.

Every moment offers its lessons to be learned, as 'grist for the mill' for our greater awareness. Patience actually gives way to determination and being resolute in times of hardship. The Bodhisattva stays firm on his or her course, the Path to Peace.

Good Will
"Since I went forth from home into homelessness,
I haven't known an ignoble, aversive resolve
'may these beings be destroyed,
be slaughtered, fall into pain' --
I've not known this resolve in this long, long time.
But I have known good will, unlimited,
fully developed, nurtured step after step,
as taught by the One Awake:
to all, a friend;
to all, a comrade;
for all beings, sympathetic.
And I develop a mind of good will,
delighting in non-malevolence -- always.
Unvanquished, unshaken,
I gladden the mind.
I develop the sublime abiding,
not frequented by the lowly." Therag 14, 1.

The early stages of practice are actually spent healing and coming to terms with hostility, bitterness and anger. Goodwill is first acknowledged for ourselves. Forgiveness and kindness are necessary to bringing closure with past sorrows. Otherwise what we end up doing is bringing our personal baggage of suffering with us and projecting it. This isn't a masked or a faked sympathy, but a penetrating compassion for our sorrows and

unhappiness. Until we can acknowledge our suffering, we won't be able to connect with the greater suffering in the world.

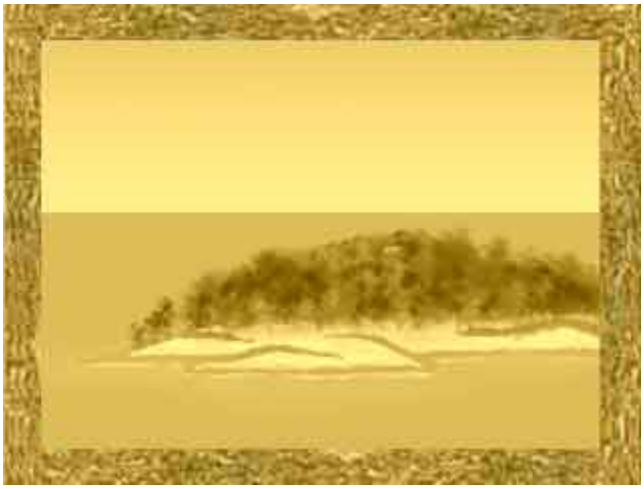
If someone approaches you with anger, it isn't likely against you, but that the person has in some other way felt fear or inconvenience. Caring, we listen with true appreciation to the other person and their problems. Within us is the genuine wish that everyone have insight into their suffering. From our secure practice comes boundless goodwill.

Goodwill and loving kindness open to understand the world. Situations that could have been difficult and people who could have been a challenge, now are patiently dealt with. No longer is there an I, me, mine aggression but our perception is a sensitive acknowledgement for everyone.

Equanimity
"Calmed, restrained,
giving counsel unruffled,
he lifts off evil states of mind --
as the breeze, a leaf from a tree." Therag 1, 2

Our awareness unifies in an expression of fulfillment and equanimity. Having confidence as well as being accepting, tolerant and forgiving are the qualities of equanimity. The Middle Way brings a clear mind to the understanding of self-promoted suffering. Equanimity emerges as a solidarity of compassion and wisdom. Nothing is a threat, a worry or a danger. The Bodhisattva reflects compassion and wisdom. Outside of full awakening and being a Buddha, equanimity is our closest awareness to enlightenment. Whatever the moment, the Bodhisattva is understanding, patient and calm. We have gone from Everyday conflicts and upsets to Knowing a non-self, generous, patient and wise nature. Whatever the situations or encounter, we are resilient.

Eight Worldly Conditions (vicissitudes)



"These eight worldly conditions spin after the world, and the world spins after these eight worldly conditions…Now, gain arises for a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones. He reflects, 'Gain has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, and subject to change.' He discerns it as it actually is.

"Loss arises...Status arises...Disgrace arises...Censure arises...Praise arises…Pleasure arises...Pain arises. He reflects, 'Pain has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, and subject to change.' He discerns it as it actually is. His mind does not remain consumed with the gain. His mind does not remain consumed with the loss…with the status…the disgrace...the censure...the praise...the pleasure. His mind does not remain consumed with the pain. He does not welcome the arisen gain, or rebel against the arisen loss. He does not welcome the arisen status, or rebel against the arisen disgrace. He does not welcome the arisen praise, or rebel against the arisen censure. He does not welcome the arisen pleasure, or rebel against the arisen pain. As he thus abandons welcoming and rebelling, he is released from birth, aging, and death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs. He is released, I tell you, from suffering and stress.

"This is the difference, this the distinction, this the distinguishing factor between the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones and the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person." AN 8, 6.

We pine for a glamorous life, but the happy endings are all Hollywood deception. Events, moments and people move in cycles. This is the Dharma of impermanence. One minute you are on top of the world and then next you are climbing out of a hole. The lives of celebrities prove this best. A more irresponsible, unrealistic and insecure group of people you will never meet—face lifts, drugs and alcohol addiction, indulging until they are over indulged. When the money runs out and the party is over, they find themselves sober and alone. Actually, they should be commended for the

real life examples and lessons they provide us. You might get what you want, but at what price and remember it won't last!

Wisdom comes down to being happy and secure with what we have and who we are. This is why the simple life creed of monastics rings true: food, clothing, shelter, medicine—I have everything I need, let the riches come from my good intentions. Most of us have basic security and comfortable lives, an education and good job; home, food and the means as well as being loved by friends and family. But we need to always remind ourselves of the unsettled nature of life. The classic beauty of a rose is a real-life lesson and mirrors our own situations. The rose emerges from the bud as we do from the womb. The flower slowly unfolds and is exposed to the changes of climate and the seasons. We experience changes in our lives. The rose blooms then begins to wilt. We mature and age. There is one difference between the rose and our human condition—we have wisdom.

Gain and Loss

Not only is there gain and loss of material possessions, but there are also much harder hitting, emotional gains and losses. The biggest illusion we all suffer from is our notion of self-identification. Normally it isn't until we are old and have slowed down that we are jolted to the fact that we aren't going to live forever. I can't do half the things I could in my youth. My body doesn't respond. This is impermanence. I make up for this with caring and understanding.

Gain is marked with selfish and egotistical pride, conceit and arrogance. We feel in control, all-powerful and a know-it-all. But this is short lived. Money, status, position, and power are deceptions we struggle to hold on to and control. On the flip side when things don't go our way we are annoyed, fearful and insecure. Again, self and ego are the source of our suffering and problems as we do things with a motive of gain and control.

The Perfections of the Bodhisattva help us deal with loss and gain. One well known, Senior Master tells the story of his mother passing away and how he wept at the loss of this all-important person in his life. We have feelings and honestly relate to them. There is no covering up, deception or being callous. But putting things into perspective, the Dharma has us understanding that life presents us with challenges. We meet the adversities with patience, equanimity and a clear mind of wisdom.

Fame and Infamy

Who wouldn't like to be the toast of the town, complimented by friends, recognized and sought after? But again fame feeds the ego and inevitably there comes a downfall. We can't make everyone happy and be all things to all people. Someone is always going to feel left out and bitter. The backlash is guaranteed. The President, the Governor or a parent know all about making unpopular decisions. When we are generous, and share in the Perfections, kind actions are usually returned to us, but we don't have any expectations or illusions of needing any such recognition. A truly practiced and wise person isn't swayed by praise or off handed remarks. If in the end we are the only ones to know what has honestly happened then we can be content in our living truthfully.

When you read the discourses, you will be surprised at how regularly the Buddha was criticized. He was also paid great homage. Whatever the situation, moment or encounter, he was unwavering and fearless. He realized all too well how notoriety is a burden rather than an asset. His speech, actions and thoughts reflected wisdom. He remained steadfast to awareness, understanding and having compassion as being his guidelines.

Praise and Blame

If politicians weren't in general so corrupt we would do well to follow their example of great resiliency for praise or blame. As long as they are in power you can say anything you want about them, and they will smile. But more realistically praise is ego inflating while blame crushes our personal image. Praise is soothing and gentle while blame is hostile and unwelcome. We like people and situations where we feel comfortable, are well received, admired and avoid any negative feedback. The antics of self and ego are devious and subtle.

But how do we handle criticism and blame without feeling the need to fight back and avenge an insult? It is self that needs to be comforted. Praise and blame are as changing as the weather. One moment it can be warm and pleasant and the next moment cold and raining. Sometimes all we can do is endure and accept the situation as it is. No amount of justification will help. These are challenging lessons for all of us. The other person is entitled to their opinions even if they run counter to our own. View yourself as a peacemaker. After all, you are on the Path to Peace.

Happiness and Pain

There is Everyday happiness and Known happiness. Everyday happiness soothes and comforts our ego illusion, always leading to disappointments. Everyday happiness relates to the three different forms of desire: our senses and sensual desire; self and ego desire attachment to the idea that we are a unique person or individual; and the desire of no-self that is an extreme reaction to life.

In our daily exchanges the pendulum swings from sensual and self-happiness to difficulty and being unhappy. Remaining calm, steady, secure is a measure of our understanding and practice. Happiness is impermanent and pain is impermanent. When I severely sprained my ankle while at the temple, I immediately knew the impermanence of the situation and that change would come. I hobbled for two months before the ankle did improve. During my convalescence I meditated on what it would be like to be permanently handicapped and the equanimity needed for such a life. The late film star, Christopher Reeve, who once played the action hero Superman, was confined to a wheelchair after a serious horse riding accident. He was no less a person, showed great courage and received support from friends and family. Imagine what it must be like to live a handicapped life. The marathon runner and Olympic champion, Abebe Bikila, became paralyzed from the waist down after a car accident.

This isn't a fatalistic or pessimistic point of view, but realizing the impermanent nature of life. The Dharma is reflected and evidenced in everything around us. Can we be 'happy' regardless of the situation, circumstance or encounter? At the end of each e-mail I have the signature piece "whatever form the earth and the universe make me, may I be at peace." This is a reminder to myself and sharing with others a deeper realization of life.

Like riding a cresting wave which peaks then crashes, we are picked up, carried for a while then tossed. How we handle and cope with the ups and downs of life is the true measure of our spiritual journey. There are Everyday reactions of indignation, disappointment, anger, fear, and confusion as we cling to self-driven needs and expectations, or realizing our true fearless potential and release from self through our experienced Dharma wisdom. Be confident, you have awakened.

Life Practice

The Big Picture begins with glimpses of understanding. Only our own self imagined weakness creating misunderstandings and obstacles limits us. Take the time to notice the Dharma and change around you, how things arise and how they move on. Wrinkles now line your face, but they can be smiling lines of awareness. Awareness, understanding and wisdom more than make up for our lack of strength or speed. Attached to a self-nature, we realize how silly and caught up you were about things.

The next time you are outside look around. You are a part of the elements. Leaves fall. The wind gusts and carries things. Water moves swiftly. You come across the remains of an animal. Notice all the elements from sun, earth, water, and air that were in this creature. See how, in its passing it returns to the elements to share its life energy. You have awareness, understanding and wisdom. Now watch your karma energy and where it is leading you. With his last breath the Buddha uttered: "It is the nature of all compounded things to decay. Attain perfection through diligence." DN 16.

At times we find ourselves sick, but have our actions and carelessness actually made us sick? Reached for are tranquilizers and painkillers; covered up are unresolved issues. Simplicity is the key to refuge and renunciation as we loosen our bag of material and emotional attachments. The Middle Way is the key to bringing balance to our lives. Presented with options and choices, a deepening awareness and understanding has lifted the veil of self.

The Path to Peace has brought us to wisdom.